

DOROTHY (Pete) COMEAU (DC)

INTERVIEWER: JIM NELSON (JN)

THIRD PERSON: FRED COMEAU

DATE: NOVEMBER 11, 2001

We are talking today, November 11, 2001. We are at the residence of Mrs. Dorothy Comeau of Grovedale on the subject of early days on the south Wapiti and what life was like in the mountains back then, I guess.

JN I guess we should start at the beginning and how you came to be living down here and about when that was and . . .

DC Yes, well, in about 1933 my husband became a Forest Ranger and at that time it was a very necessary thing because there was a lot of fires and a lot of timber for wood burning. However, he became a Fire Ranger/Forest Ranger and we moved into the south end of Grande Prairie. He found it very difficult keeping horses and so, and especially in the winter. We decided we'd come out and live in this area where he was the ranger. So we did come in '33, no, he became a Forest Range in '33 and we came out in 1939. We went down south to here where we are now. There were several families already out here, in the district what they called the Bridge Creek area. My brother, Jack, was one of them with his family out here, there was the Blanchettes, there was Carl Deffner and he was a bachelor, and Alf Graham, another bachelor,

JN You said earlier that you were one of the first women here. Who would be one of the first when you got out here? There were all these bachelors and

DC There was women here not only me. Mrs. Blanchette, Mrs. Jack Penson, they were here at that time and Mrs. Gilbert and Mrs. Jenkins also were here. There was no school.

JN Were the people primarily homesteaders or ranching out here or what?

DC Eventually we were able to homestead and at that time it wasn't surveyed either, so we were sort of taking chances, we liked it up here. No school, that was difficult. We had to get the children lessons from the government for the children.

JN Correspondence like?

DC Yes

JN Your husband was still working for the Forest Rangers, what was his work like? Would it take him away from home in the summer or sometimes in the winter? What was his routine like?

DC He had to go out, he made trips all around different areas, and sometimes when there was a fire they had to look for it because there was no way. They didn't have radios or CB at first.

JN So typically how long would he be gone for?

DC Oh, he would be gone for weeks sometimes.

JN Sometimes a whole month. He would be gone on horseback then?

DC Pardon

JN He would be gone on horseback then?

DC Yes, he would have to have horses and in winter time they used dog teams.

JN Really?

DC Yes, really. Horses weren't so great in winter, but Pete was a great walker and he would walk for miles and miles.

JN When he was gone for those times, what was life like for you?

DC It wasn't too bad. I'd teach the kids their ABCs and things like that. Being alone was okay, it didn't bother me very much. Sometimes it was kind of awkward. We managed.

JN Where was the nearest grocery store?

DC It was at Bain's, Bain's General Store.

FC It was a mile and a half north and a half mile west of here.

JN Not far from the existing place now.

DC I thought Bain's was farther across the north of us.

FC What?

DC I thought Bain's was farther north of us.

FC No, it was a mile and a half north. When we were out on the old homestead...

DC That's what I meant.

FC It was eight miles through the back road to Bain's.

DC Yes, we built a log house back there and lived there for about six to seven years.

JN You built a log house first?

DC Yes

JN And that was on the original place?

FC The original place here was we built a log house first, then barns and shed.

DC Yeah. We had cattle.

JN Obviously at the start the children would have been young, did you have other help in terms of taking care of the cattle and things when Pete would be gone?

DC Phil and Fred were a pretty good size, eight or nine, what year was it? How old were you at that time?

FC Well I was ten when we arrived on the homestead. I was twelve when we moved over here.

JN So when you think back on those years, what kind of memories or pictures come to mind? What was life like for you back then? A daily routine when Pete would be gone?

DC We enjoyed living over there, we had some neighbors there, not too close, but everybody was a good walker in those days. You had to be. We had my brother and his big family and we had eleven children. And the other neighbors, we would all get together once in a while and have a picnic or something like that. There would be dances in the Grovedale Hall and it wasn't long before Jack and I were playing for dances.

JN You used to play for dances?

DC Jack played the violin and I played piano. And we kept that up for many years. They did it every May over there, but here, when we moved up here, that's when they had lots of dances and things like that.

JN So would you climb in the wagon and pick up neighbors along the way and head to the dance hall?

DC That's right, horses and wagons.

JN Do you remember being alone a lot? Was it a lonely existence when your husband was working?

DC Yes, we were home a lot. But there were no real roads, there was just trails at that time. Later when we got roads we got cars, but we didn't stay in that location, we moved up here in '45. Then we were able to get the land and file on an acreage and then the next year we got a school and we started getting civilized.

JN What sort of things would Pete tell you when he came back from a long trip? Especially back in the back country?

DC Oh, he would have had some interesting times too.

JN Can you remember any of the stories he might tell when he came home after being gone for a few weeks?

DC I can't seem to think of something right now. Can you, Fred?

FC No except maybe a horse would get away from him and he would have to go for a day for it. Maybe black bears quite often.

DC Lots of bears

FC Yeah

JN Did you ever worry about bears when you were left alone on the homestead without your husband around?

DC Yes. I had to shoot one, it was coming into the house. It was coming too fast. Well it woke me up at night and it was in the porch and I looked up from where I was sleeping and here was its paws up like this, this bear was drooling down the glass. Well, there was nobody home that was able to shoot except me. I couldn't do it very good but I just scared him away that night but the next day he did come back in the daylight and I did shoot him. Sometimes you have to do those things whether you like it or not.

JN Can you remember what kind of gun it was?

DC Pardon?

JN What kind of gun you shot him with?

DC A 33?

JN More like a 30 aught 6 (30-06).

DC 30 aught 6

FC Yeah

DC Yeah. That is the only time I had to shoot a bear or anything else, actually.

JN I imagine your husband made use of the game that was available around you.

DC Uh hm. We used to have our venison and our moose. It was very tough chewing.

FC Lots of moose meat.

DC What?

FC Lots of moose meat.

DC Oh, yes

JN How did you put it up when you didn't have a freezer in the early years?

DC We used to can it.

FC Canned hundreds of quarts of moose meat. It was sitting out there in the shed, whole whacks of quart sealers.

JN How do you prepare moose meat to can it?

DC What?

JN How do you prepare moose meat to can it?

DC Well you just cut it up, and start sterilizing the jars, and then put the meat in the jars, pack it in with some salt and seal them, not real tight, put them in the boiler and cook them for a certain time, depends on how much. We used to can dozens of quarts. Not elk, we never had elk, did we?

FC No elk here then, no elk at all.

DC There wasn't many deer.

FC Back in Bridge Creek there was enough deer, but in the summertime you don't kill a big animal because they'll spoil before it's cooked. In the fall when they keep for a while you can kill a big one and then get it canned before it'll spoil.

JN You didn't have electricity or anything like that either, or natural gas for heat. So, what was your day like? What was a typical work day for you?

DC Oh I had to wash clothes with an old washboard and tub, that was quite common, we didn't have washers out there or a dryer. I think maybe some of the women had a different kind of washer that didn't require electricity, but I didn't have that. I was strong in those days and young so there wasn't much I couldn't do if I wanted to. I had to sew their clothes, a lot of them, and I knit socks and things like that. I was pretty busy.

JN I was gonna say, you didn't have to think about what you were going to do with your day.

DC At the end of the day I was mighty worn out.

JN Firewood was a big job?

FC Yeah, it was a big problem. Though in the fall we'd go to places that were burned off and we'd haul out about fifteen or twenty loads with a team and wagon or a team and sleigh. And Joe Blanchette had a saw. He would come around to the neighbors and everybody would pitch in and cut wood for days on end in the fall, getting a huge wood pile up.

JN The whole community together.

FC We went to everybody's place and had enough wood for the winter. Then it was our job to load it up and pack it in.

JN How much wood would it take for winter?

FC Oh, in cords, I guess it must have been 30 cords? That airtight was just about humping there for a month.

JN So it was an airtight and a cook stove I guess you had, aye? What was it like cooking on a cook stove compared to the range you have now.

DC Yes, we had a cook stove and an airtight. It was nice, the cook stove, a nice heat too. It was comfortable.

JN How was cooking on a cook stove compared to electric or gas?

DC I liked it.

JN You didn't mind it.

DC I think it's better than the electric one sometimes.

JN How would you get around when Pete would be gone? Would you drive a team or ride or . . .

DC I rode horseback a lot. But we pretty well stayed home for that time. The boys were able to go to Bain's, they had a little store there and a post office. They walked over. Sometimes I rode horseback, I guess

JN Aye?

DC Sometimes I rode horseback

FC We had a dog team too in the winter time.

DC A dog team.

JN Did you ever drive the dogs?

DC No, not me.

JN Did you ever have a favourite horse?

DC Oh yes. We had favourite horses.

JN Do you remember one of your favourites?

DC Yes, Barney. That was a good name for a horse. Barney and May.

JN They were a team? You also rode saddle horses?

DC They were just horses. They weren't fancy or anything.

FC Pack horses?

JN All purpose

DC Yeah

JN How come you got along with Barney? What was so nice about him?

DC Pardon?

JN What was so nice about Barney? Why did you get along with Barney?

DC Oh, I don't know, he was just a good horse, you know. You could handle him, not that I did much of that. The boys were always there to do that part.

FC You could always catch him. That was always one horse you could go and get.

JN That's a plus.

FC Some were so wild.

JN What kind of dogs, when you say you drove dogs. What kind of dogs?

FC Oh, we had huskies. They were a cross between mostly husky and Heinz 57. Big and husky fellas. We had three or four for a dog team. We would always raise hell on the way to the store with the neighbors' cats.

JN I had a Husky at one time, we used to get him to pull the kids and things. I more to do with horses, but I never had to travel by dog team. But those that have done it told me you could travel farther and faster in good conditions with a dog team than you could with a horse.

FC Dad used to trap in the winter. Only the summer time he was a paid ranger and in the winter he trapped, you see. I lived at Grovedale here, right at this place. We went to Bald Mountain about 25 miles with a dog team and it was just a, well, we were really played out but they weren't.

JN How long did that take?

FC It took about six hours

JN You couldn't do that with a horse unless you're ready to get rid of the horse.

FC You just go go go all the time.

JN What kind of a trail would that be, what kind of conditions?

FC Well this one was a good trail, it was hard, there had been a chinook and it froze, we really had a nice trail. When the snow was fairly deep you could still get along way better than the average horse. A horse wouldn't plug through snow that deep, not for very many miles and he'd be tired out. Dogs, they were in a long string, you know, just keep unhooking them and put them in the back.

JN One breaking trail

FC Yeah, just go all the time

JN How much could they pull or haul in terms of the weight in good conditions?

FC Oh, it would be at least 100 pounds, at least.

JN You said that sometimes Pete would go out in the winter with the dogs as part of the Forestry Ranger job?

FC No, he was a ranger for how many years just in the summer, he was a ranger only in summer just a few years, then he went on permanently, all the rangers were on permanently, but in the winter time he had to go to all the sawmills, but he didn't have a truck then, he'd just get out on the road and hitchhike.

DC We also had cattle. Not very many but had enough for our milk and we made butter and that sort of thing. And chickens, so we had our own eggs and things.

JN So milking the cows was one more thing you had to do morning and night.

DC I think he did it, I don't think I did very much of that.

JN I should say for the tapes purposes that the other person is Fred Comeau, the rest is Dorothy, Fred is the other voice on the tape.

FC When I couldn't get out of it I had to milk the cows.

JN They gotta be milked.

DC Yes

JN And you said you liked living out there, you said?

DC Yes, I did.

JN Compared too . . . You are not one of those people like myself who has to live in town, but what did you like about it compared to that kind of a . . .

DC Living in town?

JN What did you like about, for someone who never tried that lifestyle before, describe what you liked about it.

DC Well, it was such a natural way of living out there and we had good neighbours and got together quite often. You know we made quilts and things like that. We got along very good

JN You would be quite a ways from a doctor or a hospital. Did that worry you back then?

DC Yes, we were quite a ways. It never had any bad effects though. There was never anything that we couldn't handle. You know, there was always some people around here who could help with those kind of things. But we did eventually have women who came around on visits and check on things. I forget what they were called.

FC A couple of nurses travelled around. What were they called... a couple of nurses who travelled around different ways, they had a van and a truck one time...

DC We called them the "van" girls.

FC The van girls, yeah. They did vaccinations...

DC They gave religion instruction too so we wouldn't grow up to be heathens.

JN Were they successful for the most part?

FC I guess partly.

JN Well, they would be like a health unit nurse now I guess.

DC Pardon?

JN They would be like a health unit nurse now.

DC Yes, something like that.

JN People who do inoculations and things like that. But what if you did break an arm or cut yourself?

DC That happened, I'm sure more than once.

FC Well, haul them to town, I imagine.

DC They'd get to town somehow, get to the doctor.

JN How early did the ferry come in?

FC Did the ferry come in? Well, was the ferry in when we came out here?

DC There was a ferry right along in the summertime.

FC We had to ford the river one time, two or three times, as the water was so low for the ferry but the ferry was in until the first bridge. In the wintertime we had a log bridge that the lumber companies would haul the lumber across.

JN I suppose there would be some time in the spring at break up where you couldn't get across . . .

DC Yeah, there was a time

FC Yeah, a bad time. You had a row boat, and...

JN You didn't go unless you had to, I imagine.

FC Not unless you had to.

DC Sometimes a person had to if they were sick or something, you had to get in.

- JN Do you remember any of those times? Any specific examples of people getting sick or injured and having to go to town?
- DC If I could just remember like I should be able to.
- JN I know it is hard to do that on the spot like that, it either comes into your mind or . . .
- DC I know there was cases many times... can you think of anybody that had to cross because of illness or something, broken legs or anything?
- JN What about your Dad? Was he ever, he just never get sick?
- FC Until he got cancer and then that was it.
- JN I'm thinking of being alone. For a lot of people being alone out on a horse for weeks on end out in the bush would be tough.
- FC He just never got sick. I never heard of him getting sick out in the bush or never went off a horse the wrong way. He hardly ever got on the...

Appears to be the end of the recording

Transcribed by Grace Wallace

July 2015