

Interview with Vi Overholt in the Sawdy District

by Eileen Chamberlain

My parents were born in Ontario. My Dad at Pond Hill and my mother at Port Perry. They got most of their schooling there. I was born in Gateway Oregon on the twenty-third of May 1916

My parents moved to Duchess AB and they lived there possibly 3 years. They were split up there and my sister and I were in a Salvation Army home in Calgary. Two ladies from the Salvation Army picked me up and brought me to Edmonton and put me up for adoption at 3 or 4 years of age.

I remember them coming and asking me if I liked to go for a car ride and I'd never been in a car so said sure and then my sister started crying and told me not to go with them and they got my hands and I left. After we were in the car and the car was moving, one woman said to the other, "Why didn't we take the sister as well as her?" and the other said to her, "She wouldn't forget her mother." I'd like to be able to tell them now, "Neither did I."

So then I came up to Edmonton. I was in different homes for a while. I don't know if someone was paying board for me there, but Harry and Mabel came and adopted me after Christmas in 1923 and I arrived in Athabasca on January second of 1924 and I've been here (Athabasca) ever since. I was seven years old and that was Harry and Mabel Overholt.

They lived on the next quarter here to the east. And so you were their adopted daughter then.

I was in grade two then. I went to school while I was in Edmonton.

Eileen: Do you remember which school?

Vi: I haven't a clue. So I came here and went to school in the Sawdy School and my first teacher was Mrs. Watson, Mrs. Elsie Watson.

Eileen: Did she live in the area?

Vi: No she lived at Rocky Mountain House and boarded at Mabel Overholt's house.

Eileen: How many years did you go to school here?

Vi: Through Grade eight

Eileen: Did you have some good playmates around here?

Vi: Oh yes, well ah mostly I was the only child there at the Overholt's, but Saturday was mail day and we have the post office so there was lots of kids to play with Saturday afternoon.

Eileen: So the Overholts had the post office here?

Vi: Yes. At a later date, I took over the post office .

Eileen: Do you remember any special events?

Vi: Well one of the things I remember, I can't remember what anniversary it was but the 1st of July The RCMP and another fellow had cars drove and picked up the kids that hadn't ridden in cars. The roads were not very good.

Eileen: How often would you go to town?

Vi: I went in quite often usually on Saturday. Mabel Overholt would pick up the mail and in the winter it could be pretty cold and we never missed picking up the mail. By the time I finished school it was 1931.

Eileen: You lived just down the road East of here. and what about your family?

Vi: No I got married in 1931. and had 4 boys and one girl. Norma and Bob is my second son, they were all born in the Athabasca Hospital Gerald and Pat and Allan.

Eileen: Where was the hospital then?

Vi: Next to Deacon Littles on 49th and 49th . It was a general hospital. This was before the nuns took it over as a retirement home.

My husband's name was Walter and he was the son of Louis and Mary Overholt from Toronto and died at 45 of a heart attack. He was in the hospital when he passed away.

Eileen: Were your adopted parents related to your husband?

Vi: Yes he was their nephew.

Eileen: Can you tell me about the Peace River Trail?

Vi: It started in Athabasca cause the trail up here from Edmonton was the Landing Trail. It (The Peace River Trail) went way North.

Eileen: Did it start just across the river?

Vi: No, from Athabasca, it comes through the sandridge at least so far as I know. Close to town.

Eileen: Did you ever travel over that trail?

Vi: I went to Tomato Creek a couple of times.

Eileen: Why did you go to Tomato Creek?

Vi: To visit the Lee Goodwins They were good friends.

Eileen: What were the Goodwins names?

Vi: Well, the ones I went to visit were Billy and Maggie Goodwin I never went up there while Margie and Andy Goodwin were living there. They were in a place where the telegraph went through and the Government Telegraph put a telephone in the house cause they couldn't understand Morse Code. They would take a call from Athabasca or Smith or Mirror Landing at 10:00 each morning and if the call didn't come through, then the linemen would know something was wrong with the line and get out and fix it. I don't know how long the post office sat all by itself across the river at

Mirror Landing, they called it, and they had to go across on the railroad bridge or the ferry to get the mail.

It was pretty tough travelling in the summer. There were some places they lost horses in there, possibly their wagon wheels would break down. Most of them went on through to Peace River. Did you know anyone else besides the Goodwins connected with the Peace River Trail? Well, most of the people here went up the Peace River Trail hunting and they still do. Since we got skidoos and quads and horseback there is a lot of traffic. I'm not too sure too many people walk it! Most of the people that had settled here went up the hill to hunt.

Eileen: Where is the Bald hill, where is that?

Vi: About 8 miles west. It's just one big hill about 1/2 of it slid into the river. When I come here there was just grass growing and in some places there was just raw clay. Like I don't know when the big slide was, but it must have half blocked the Athabasca River.

Eileen: How far are you from the River?

Vi: The top of the bank is just under one mile west from here and then about a mile down to the river bank. We used to go swimming out at the sand bar. It made a safe swimming hole for quite a few years. Then there was a bad break up of ice where ice piled up and rocks moved in there and we lost our swimming hole.

Eileen: How old were you then?

Vi: About 12 to 16. We missed the swimming hole. There are no lakes close to her. We would take a picnic and the adults went too. Sawdy Hall opened in 1923 built by the community. And that was at Rypien's, an old log building, it saw a lot of dances and Christmas concerts.

Eileen: Where was the school in relation to the hall?

Vi: One mile this way.

Eileen: Where were receptions and banquets held back then?

Vi: At home at that time and the whole community was invited at that time. In the 20's and 30's everyone was welcome.

Eileen: Who were some of the friends in the area?

Vi: Rypien Boys went to school with them and still friends and visit them. A lot of them aren't around anymore. Everyone walked to school Mabel Overholt boarded the teacher and I had a 1/2 mile to walk to school which wasn't too bad. Others had to walk 3 to 3 1/2 miles. Every one walked, no horses. At one time they had a stable but there was very few ever rode horses. Where I went to school there was muskeg and they built the road through there. About two years before spring all the dirt went down the corduroy and disappeared and there was just big poplar logs left holding the

corduroy in place or it would have went away, floated away. We would walk on these big poplar logs and of course once in a while you would slip so we got a little help.

Eileen: What was the road like for the mail to Athabasca?

Vi: It wasn't good. There was no gravel and in places it wasn't even graded.

Eileen: How long did it take to get to town?

Vi: Three hours.

Eileen: Did the Overholts have a vehicle?

Vi: Yes. They had a team of horses for their vehicle.

Eileen: Did they get any supplies for the neighbours?

Vi: They would take cream in for them pick up groceries. I think the creamery started around 1928. That was the stable for a lot of RCMP stations in town horses and it eventually became a creamery The police barracks were just behind that on the next street. (Where Ken's News is now) A big two story house where the officers stay and another isn't quite as fancy as that's where they had the dining room and the ones that weren't officers stayed there. They had quite a few here at that time. They placed Alberta in the mid North West Territories after I arrived here it was the home base for RCMP from Athabasca but they didn't spend too much time in Athabasca .

Eileen: What else was on main street in those days?

Vi: The hotel managed to escape the fire. It was on main street then. There was another hotel where The Riverfront Restaurant is, where Bissel's garage used to be. For years there was cement steps going into the basement from the old hotel the other hotel.

Eileen: What about the hospital and the Doctor?

Vi: Doctor Meyers was here. I don't know who the doctors were before him because he was here possibly from the beginning of the first world war I'm not sure. I never hear them mention any doctors other than him. He would travel by horseback a lot and make house calls

Eileen: Where were the groceries bought?

Vi: Lessard's Store, Northern Distributing, on main street towards the west end. At that time the main street ran east and west.

Eileen: What did you do for entertainment?

Vi: A game called Fox and Goose in the winter out in the snow. We could spend quite a bit of time playing baseball and grade 1-8 being taught sometimes 40 children going at least three and four at beginners and the older girls would out in the yard we would teach them games the boys were kind of bad they'd try and get the little guys to fight. If we had our work done we could help teach the little ones. One classroom. the least would be about 36 students. At that time there were pretty big families. McKelvey 11, Schmelzles 12, Adds up quickly The lectures they had to prepare.

Eileen: What did you take for lunch?

Vi: Well, sandwiches, of some kind and fruit would freeze before you got there and most of the time you couldn't afford to buy it.

Eileen: What did you carry it in?

Vi: A lard pail. And you could use it for self defense too!

Eileen: How were the neighbours?

Vi: Not bad most of them.

Eileen: So it was a good move from Edmonton. Did you ever find your sister?

Vi: Yes, and my brother. I knew there was something illegal about my transfer. Mother was paying board for us at the Salvation Army and I was taken out without her consent. Because they did tell her where I was, she had to sign a statement that she would cause no trouble for the people who adopted me, but she did write and I had learned over the years. I could ask a lot of questions but personal questions I did not ask. And I found my Mother's picture on the shelf. She sent it on the bus. I got in contact after I got married with my mother sister and brother. My brother is younger. First time I saw my mother was in Michigan where she lived 1939. The next time I went down again in 1970.

Eileen: Was your mom was still around at that time?

Vi: Yes, I knew my sister was living in the same city as my brother. For some reason my brother and sister didn't get along too well and I didn't see as much as I would like to of my brother. I never did find out what their problem was.

My mother died in 82. She died of cancer She had a colostomy in 72. She spent 15 days in extensive care and made a terrible patient. Said if she knew the operation was going to be so painful shed' never have had it. But she insisted she was only in extensive care 4 days, but she was in there 15 days. My sister came up to visit me in Athabasca twice. She lived in Calgary until she was 10, so she thought we were up close to the Arctic.

Eileen: You're talking about the Peace River Trail?

Vi: Walter Haub had a Trapping cabin at 5 mile Creek. Bill Kobzey was up in that area, Jakey Gislason and the Haub boys, Bob and Herb. Walter Haub was the other side of Tomato Creek the rest were this side. We used to go up and pick saskatoons.

Eileen: Seemed quite a big hill?

Vi: Yes. We walked up the hill. If we took horses or vehicles we went around. My son Robert, his first job was with Dominion government Telegraph for Lee Goodwin on the Peace River Trail. They started at Athabasca and replaced needed posts and went up along the #2 Hwy around Slave Lake to Grouard on into Peace River and cross country to Fort McMurray. At that time there was only one line in use and the one from Ft. McMurray and the one from Calling Lake was in use to Athabasca but ours

wasn't. There was a trail from Athabasca to McMurray through Pelican Portage of telegraph and my sons help service that area with Lee Goodwin. That was about the last year they replaced any poles That was in 1955. He had finished grade 9 and that was his summer job. He worked up at Konior's camp and next spring he got on with AGT.

Eileen: What were the meals you had in those days?

Vi: Other than the summer you didn't have too much in the line of salads, apples, and other vegetables were a treat.

Eileen: Meat?

Vi: Pork, but you didn't have it very often, butchered beef not very often, but wild game that made up for the beef .

Eileen: You had moose and deer?

Vi: We did our own butchering.

Eileen: How would you keep it in the early days?

Vi: Well, we canned it and it froze nicely, but you had to do something with in the spring. We pickled it in a brine, both pork and beef.

Eileen: How old are you now?

Vi: 82.

Eileen: And you think it's been not too bad a life?

Vi: Oh yes

Eileen: You feel good about your life"

Vi: Oh yes. Yes.

Eileen: What do you think about the Athabasca Area?

Vi: Lovely area. Rivers.

Eileen So it's been a very positive area to live? No disasters or anything? Did you worry about the crops in those days? Those sorts of things never change?

Vi: In the 30's and 40's we had earlier springs than we usually have now. The wheat was in by the 20th of April, but we always seemed to get a frost just after the middle of August. I have had peas froze down and started a new growth and was able to pick a second crop. That was an exception where we didn't have an early fall. I also had chickens hatch out after the grain was threshed in the straw pile ... they wouldn't survive the winter, but...

Eileen: So you raised chickens and your own eggs your own milk and cream. Did you ship cream and milk from your own cows?

Vi: Yes and milked up the cows and That was money to buy groceries. That was a cash crop you didn't have to wait for it.

Eileen: Did you ship any grain or did you feed it?

Vi: Shipped some I think it would be about half and half..

Eileen: How many horses did you have around?

Vi: About 8 or 10.

Eileen: Did you help in the field too? No, you made breakfast in the morning in harvest time?

Vi: It would only last 2 or 3 days in the smaller farms depending on what acreage you had.

Eileen: What acreage did you have here?

Vi: Well, we had 160 acres. Breakfast was about 6:00 am in the morning. Had cows to milk and pigs to feed and then at a later date men wanted a lunch at 10:00 o'clock. That really breaks me up cause we had to make pies. I'd have them made ahead for one meal but everything was eaten and they devoured after each meal so we had to start fresh each time.

Eileen: Where did the men stay when they came to help harvest?

Vi: Well most of them went home. Some of the bachelors would sleep on the floor and in the granary if one was empty but they usually liked it at our place.

Eileen: Was it someone else's machinery that would come in and do the threshing for you?

Vi: Yes, the neighbours'. Most of the crew were locals though. While they might have three or four miles to go home it wasn't that bad. they took their teams home so they had enough time to eat. They would go from neighbour to neighbour. It was three weeks to a month to get all the threshing done. There was at least one threshing machine in Fair Haven and here possibly in Grayville and there wasn't a decent road to go into the North side into Grayville. It was kind of isolated.

Eileen: Do you remember who had the machine?

Vi: Archie Gorman and at that time a lot of the grain in this area was stacked and then he would thresh it in the winter when it wasn't terribly cold.

Eileen: At his place?

Vi: No from place to place. Before he did the threshing there was a fellow from Big Coulee or Richmond Park . He had a stationary engine it was such a small threshing machine he had. This grain was stacked. They had trouble getting it started and he'd bring gas and warm it on top of a wood burning stove. It might take 2 hours to get it started in the morning. At the time Overholts come here there was 'Maze Ban' where the horses went around and around. the horses did the threshing. I never seen one working. But everybody took their grain down to the metis family David Latissers. In the book North of the River, there is pictures and quite a write up on the Latissers' (Ladicoure) family.

They had the only big house in the area and they were very strong Catholics, but Mr Latisser s Sabeth started at 6:00 Saturday night so at 6:00 Sunday night wasn't the Sabeth anymore. So they had a dance. So that was the way they figured.

That was the only place that was big enough to hold a dance. The living room was a big room and upstairs was a big kitchen too! The kids would go too. If there was a dance in Sawdy Hall the kids went. There were no babysitters in those days. The kids might dance in the corner and while by the time they were 12 both boys and girls were dancing on the floor. I got a kick out of them.

I babysat about 2 years ago. I babysat for Muriel and Wayne Richards. I was there nine years. The last two children were 18 months apart. The little boy was the youngest that they had. He had bronchitis that they seemed to think might turn into asthma. That year was pretty rough for him. He was such a he wanted to be in bed. His Dad always gave him the medicine I didn't. One time I did cause he wasn't home . Until he could hold his bottle and -pick it up I held him and fed him and then he would sleep for four hours. To have a sick baby who just sleeps, I kept going in there to see if he was still breathing being he was only three or four months old.

Eileen: Do you remember any sickness in the area that was outstanding?

Vi: Not really. Well, we had a whooping cough epidemic going through the area in the 1930's and then measles moved in and the boys went in to the army in 39 and 40.

Eileen: Measles and chicken pox?

Vi: They brought them both home measles and chicken pox. Most of the kids never got to town and so there wasn't too much of an influence of outside illness. The United Church came out here first before the school was built and had church in Harry Overholt's house.

Eileen: Do you remember the minister's name?

Vi: Well, His wife died of flu in 1919 or so. They were a young couple. She and her sister died and she was pregnant.

Eileen: When you had weddings, did you have them here or did you go to town?

Vi: A lot of them went to town to the Minister's house. some of the church and they come out once a month and in the winter they had church at the school and in the summer they had at the Sawdy hall until about '56.

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Eileen L. Chamberlain