

CONSUL MUSEUM INCORPORATED

Oral History Collection – Section 2

Collected by Oral History Researcher Meagan Gough
Blair and Sheila Backman Interview 2008 March 4

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Conducted at Blair and Sheila Backman's Home Site NW1-6-27-W3 North of Consul, SK

BB = Blair Backman: Interviewee
SB = Sheila Backman: Interviewee
MG = Meagan Gough: Interviewer
Audio Tape using RCA Digital Recorder
2008 March 04

MG: Your parent's names?

BB: My dad was Lewis Backman, born in 1887 in Hoffman, Minnesota, and my mother was Edith Miller, born 1915 in Golden Prairie, Saskatchewan. Her parents emigrated from Edith Spring, Kansas in 1908. The item of interest about Edith Springs is, in the past year or two they passed a town by-law, that to remain a citizen of Edith Springs, Kansas, you had to own a firearm! (Laughing) They are on the edge of the Ozarks, so...

My father's family emigrated from Sweden in 1880 and settled in Illinois and then in Minnesota. In 1902, Grandpa and the family had moved to east central Saskatchewan near Yorkton in a small town called Marchwell. They farmed and ranched there for ten years until 1912 and then my father homesteaded here at Cypress Lake when they moved to this country. I guess the main reason my father homesteaded here was he hated wet and trees and bush, and he wanted to find somewhere where it didn't rain all the time and there were no trees, and I think he was successful.

Well, my uncle, he got married to one of my dad's sisters. He had been a friend that my dad had met and he mentioned that he had come down here south of the Cypress Hills and that it had good land for homesteading. He had filed so he brought my dad down here to file for a homestead.

And the quarter where my dad homesteaded, my brother still lives there. The place where we live here, one of my uncles had homesteaded here. When he had moved to BC during the '30s, another uncle lived in this place and we moved here in 1980 and built our house and have lived here since. It had the biggest trees and the best view in the country, so that's where my wife wanted to build a house.

By chance, on the quarter that my father homesteaded, he was able to get a well quite early and as a result he was able to have a livestock operation, because if there was no water you couldn't very well water calves, so he had livestock. This yard was always short of water, so my uncle who lived here would have a team of horses or a milk cow, but that was about the limit of what they would have for livestock. The lake was available in the summer time, but winter water, there was nothing but the well. The well was very important in determining where people eventually came to farm. To survive during the '30s they had to have water, and those were the places that remained occupied. My dad's homestead had a good well on it, and when my brother and I started farming and got livestock, we found out there was a limit to that. In the '70s we had bought a place south of Consul. It had been Norman Tenborg's ranch and it had access to Battle Creek, so a year-round water supply and a really good well. The family moved to about a three-hundred-head cattle operation from about 60 cows. His yard had adequate water to water any number of animals. That was the reason that we no longer have cattle up here; we don't have the water supply. In this yard Sheila has made it her lifelong occupation that she is

going to have water for her trees and her flowers and her gardens, so we have worked at many things trying to get a pipeline water system to pump from Cypress Lake.

Cypress Lake is a very shallow lake and we have found that we have had difficulty pumping water, getting a water source out there. We recently bought a different inlet pump which allows us to pump from a shallow water source, so we have been able to get water into the yard in the past few years on a dependable basis.

When the PFRA had taken over the Richardson-McKinnon Irrigation Project, people became aware that there was going to be land parceled out to different people. My dad had his eye on this one quarter. It was going to be his favourite and he didn't have very high priority for getting it, but as the stars lined up, he was able to get the quarter that he wanted. The old pre-railroad community of Kalvinhurst was the headquarters of the Richardson Ranch.

MG: Where would that be?

BB: Two miles north of Consul on Battle Creek, just downstream before where the McKinnon weir is right now. I think you may have been out to the irrigation.

MG: Yes.

BB: It was the quarter downstream from where the McKinnon weir is. It had some trees, and that had been the site Dad wanted. It was always the dream of Mom and Dad that that was where they were going to build their house. It would be closer to town, better for getting to school and all those sorts of things, but as things worked out, that never happened. That quarter just became an irrigation quarter for raising feed, and we maintained living on the site up north here. Each year, they built something more and it just became that much less feasible to move. I never regretted it because there's horrible mosquitoes on the irrigation flat. The gist of it was for a ranch, the water supply was extremely important. Everybody got that. The grain supply was less difficult to obtain, so the site for wintering cattle or having water was the first thing, then the grazing permit was second.

Water is the number one priority. The one interesting thing is this should really be livestock country because it is dry. Grain is just on the edge of being able to be successful doing grain farming. The one thing about livestock farms or operations is they are high labour input compared to grain farming, when you get into a situation of having to put up feed. One thing I can really remember from my childhood was all the hard work involved with the haying process for example. Before I was old enough to work I remember it coming haying time I can remember everybody else working and lining up the haying crews. The farmers and those who didn't have cattle they would have a quiet time in the summer so they were available to hire. So you'd have a crew run the mowers and the rakes and then filling the flats with long hay and hauling the loads of feed from the hay flats to the wintering yards. It was very high man power. The ranches were able to achieve it because they had the reserve at Maple Creek. Most of them had a connection to a family that worked with a given ranch and that's what their labour supply was derived from, the native population. But starting in the 1950s haying was mechanized by the hay baler, and then the mechanical bale wagon, and next was the round baler and tractor loader. It took 90% of the physical work out of haying and this was probably the best memory of my life was when you no longer had to ride on the skid behind the baler.

MG: That was a 'hallelujah' moment?

BB: That's when farming didn't seem so bad anymore. I don't know if I want to be a university professor if we don't have to stack bales by hand. We got our first automatic bale stacker in 1971, a New Holland wagon. That was the time we were newly married and working at the university, and it sure made a difference in the way agriculture looked. Even though there was no money in farming at the time, the work wasn't so hard.

SB: And that wasn't a very automatic stacker.

BB: Well, that was the second one, the New Holland one. We had various things we had tried before that. We had what was called a "McClean Bale Wagon" and you made a stack on it by hand, which was still a lot of work, but the thing of it was that you could dump it back in the fields and have an upright group of bales which would stand until the fall until you could move them into storage. It cut out half the work; you didn't have to do the restacking of the bales. That was murder. It seems like there was nothing as hot as July in Saskatchewan and that was time of the year when you had to hay.

I guess one of my first memories of the early '50s is tied onto the time when people used to thrash their bundles of grain or sheaves of grain, and fork it, and handle everything by hand, so the type of the work that was involved with all the farming was not that foreign. That was what the people who had been raised at that time did, but it sure wasn't appealing to anybody younger who was able to realize there was an easier way of doing it. Now haying is extremely different – it's not the big crew, the half a dozen men it was back in those days. It's a job that's there, that takes a week or two to do, and you get it done with, as part and parcel of the farm life.

SB: Do you think your dad picked that quarter because he thought it looked like the most treed property in the whole country?

BB: No. It was available. By 1912 homestead land wasn't all that available, and Pete had found where he had and that was as close to my uncle as he could get.

MG: Peter is your uncle?

BB: My uncle that homesteaded here first, yes, Peter Heglund. He had found a piece of land that was a half a mile from Cypress Lake. The island in Cypress Lake was eventually named after him. He was very proud of his yard, and after he retired he spent the last twenty years of his life making his yard into a showpiece in horticulture. He was rewarded when they went and named the island in Cypress Lake after him.

SB: Heglund Island. It's a bird conservatory. It has cormorant nesting grounds on it, and white pelicans.

MG: Oh really?

SB: They used to graze the island, but they don't anymore because of that. They used to ship cattle across [?].

BB: Various neighbours over the years have held a lease on the island. They would take cattle over on a barge, and carry over the cattle and leave them there for the summer. At one time, the Department of Natural Resources decided what they wanted to do was foster the population of

the white pelican and the cormorant which were no longer in the southern prairies. They cut out the cattle grazing on Cypress Lake and turned it into a wildlife preserve. One of the undesirable aspects of that is that Cypress Lake has been stripped of its fish population. Of course, cormorants and pelicans have to feed on something, and they graze Cypress Lake pretty hard.

MG: Wow, are they natural to here?

BB: I guess they are natural, but not in recent memory, but they didn't survive with the grazing of the island. When cattle became popular, any of the nesting sites the cormorants and pelicans would have around water bodies tended to get disturbed, so the cormorant/pelican population disappeared very early off the prairies. This was a move in the '60s to re-establish. It was successful. They re-established cormorants and pelicans. When I was a kid, I can remember going up to Cypress Lake and fishing and catching perch and pickerel, and you would never do that now. There is no fish population to catch.

I guess with Cypress Lake there is always a conflict between using it as an irrigation reservoir and a natural site. Like Sheila said, it's a big slough that's been dammed. The nature of it is that the height of Cypress Lake hasn't been changed by creating the dam; the area was lessened. Both on the east and west sides, by building dams, they trimmed the area that the water would go into, into a smaller area, so that the level could be maintained easier. Before the construction of the dam, where highway 21 goes north to Maple Creek, that was always boggy, because that would have been about the margin of the shore where Cypress Lake would have been if it had not been levelled. So by building the dams we made it easy to get to the highway.

See, the interesting thing, your work with Native elders, and the one thing that I get is the culture of the livestock industry makes one aware of is that the farm and cattle industry displaced the native population that was here. The ranching sector prior to 1960s when haying was mechanized knew the native population was an integral part of operating a ranch. If you didn't have a labour force, you couldn't operate your ranch. You didn't have the cowboys; you didn't have the fencing crews; you didn't have the haying crew, and the native population was an important part of it. You get into the 1960s when everything got mechanized-the haying got mechanized, the fencing became mechanized. What we used to call the willow or poplar picket fence posts that the native people would pack in the Cypress Hills and treat with bluestone, which was the standard fence post that was used.

They would cut poplar or willow trees that were relatively small in diameter, two to two and a half inches in diameter, so a person could drive them with a hammer. They were the standard fencing posts at the time, and the native population, that was their specialty. They cut them, they treated them with bluestone (they were a preserved post), and then take their posts into town to trade or sell. I can remember my dad buying, after he found out someone had a load of good posts. That was the economic base of the native population - working on the ranches and also providing the fence posts. In the late '50s, Maple Creek had, for a time, a commercial fencepost preserving company that harvested lodgepole pine out of the Cypress Hills and then pressure-treated it. Instead of the standard native fencepost, you bought this commercial product and the native population was very much marginalized within a very short period of time. Their jobs on the ranch disappeared and their product that they sold became obsolete. It was very interesting what happened.

MG: Nekaneet is the one near Maple Creek?

BB: Yes.

Not being right involved, I couldn't really say, and not having viewed it from the native aspect, but I would say they were indispensable. The ranch could not have existed without their native workers, and I think that made a respect. In terms of income, none of the ranchers were rich enough to be a different economic class. I guess the one thing you couldn't say was they drank together, because back in that time Indians weren't allowed to have alcohol or anything like that, so there was very much an institutional distinction - what as an Indian you could do, and what as a white man you could do. You worked together all week long, but then when you went to town on Saturday night, if you wanted to go together and have a beer, you had to break the law to get it for them.

BB: Okay, prior to refrigeration, which depends on electrical service to the farm, supplying meat for the summer was a real problem. You could raise chicken, and you could have a chicken there to kill and feed a family. The secondary thing was that a ranch that had a labour force always had a herd of sheep because you could butcher a sheep, as a smaller animal, and that was good. You could butcher it and eat it up before the meat would spoil. For a farm, you are a little more isolated in that you don't have hired men so not a big work force. They developed this beef ring, so every summer, they would pick twenty weeks between May and later, and one person in the group, which had twenty members, would supply an animal that would be butchered, and it would be cut into twenty cuts. Each member of the organization would get one of these cuts on a rotating basis, and each week you would get a fresh one-twentieth of an animal which would provide meat for a family. The traditional butchering day was Friday night, and you would pick the meat up Saturday. It would be fresh for a Sunday roast or whatever that could be carried over for the week, and I don't know how long it would last. If you were unlucky enough during the summer to get a neck, well, you'd have to can it and have canned meat! But pork would be slaughtered in the fall and you would have that carried on over frozen. We were talking last night about the oat bin. Oats were traditionally a very good insulator, so when you butchered your meat, you would bury it in a bin full of oats and it would last on out through the spring, not into the summer, but it would keep meat frozen until May if it was buried in some oats.

The other thing was the community telephone. Long distance, government, or large company telephone didn't come into this area of Saskatchewan until 1967, probably 1968 or 1969 until we got onto the telephone system in this community. Before that, a small area would have a fence-line phone - it wasn't really on the fence - and the poles would be on the fence and then there would be a wire going around connecting them all up. It was a party line type of local phone system. There would be a work day both spring and fall to repair the fence-line, just make sure everything was working - whether it needed a new wire or a new pole, so that was another aspect of community work.

BB: There is a cultural divide and I think a big part of this was, first of all, prior to the Second World War, farming was outside of the financial world. It didn't qualify really for business at the banks. It was always sort of a self-sufficient business, whereas ranching had a cash product, the cattle, and the people who produced cattle became part of the financial sector a lot earlier than agriculture did. The large ranchers that had a large cattle base, they were quite often dependent on the financial institutions, whereas farming was kind of beside it. They just weren't as much a part of the financial world as ranchers.

I would have said, in my dad's time, if you were a rancher then probably you dealt with the bank. You probably were dealing quite a bit more in cash than farmers. Farmers were more subsiscal[?] and not that much of a cash thing. However, since then, it's changed. I would say

that probably the tables have turned and right now, farming, crop production, is a far more capital-intensive operation than livestock is, but I really couldn't tell you the difference right now except the main idea about ranching is they have a far higher land base that they operate from. If you have lots of land, then it's a ranch; if you are working with inputs and trying to produce more off of less, then it's a farm, which is a very poor explanation. It's easier to explain what it used to be than what it is now.

SB: Like when you called here a ranch, we go "no, we can't be a part of that", even though we have cattle.

BB: The one thing that makes a very different social circle between farming and ranching is the concept of the branding, because that is the one thing that has survived in modern ranching that takes a big labour force is when you work cattle. You still need lots of bodies, and the ranch community all get together to brand. They do the roundup; they do the working with the cattle when anything needs to be done. They do each person's individually, but the community comes to work for them that day. You have your day that you brand, and that's inherited. If you want to change the day you brand, you have to move to a different community. You brand after so and so, and before so and so, and that's understood.

Branding on a farm, you tend to try to do it mechanically, because you find out where in the world your labour supply is. You don't want to be spending a week going around or ten days branding in return for the people you had at your branding. That's a very interesting aspect. Farming tends to be a far more independent, because it is mechanized, and leaves you separate from the community in that way. You do your seeding, your harvest, and you never come together for any common purpose.

MG: It's so interesting because it's such a big question, what the difference between farming and ranching is. There are so many different factors that play into that.

SB: Because I'm an outsider, one of the things that struck me when I got to the school teaching is with the Kindergarten to Grade 2s, quite often there would be square-offs between ranchers and farmers. That can be very insulting to a five-year-old to be called a farmer when he's a rancher, or a rancher when he's farmer. I thought "oh!"

BB: You didn't have to be black or white; it just depended on the shape of boots you wore!

SB: They're all good friends, but they have to get their little...

BB: They've got their territory.

MG: They're carving out their identity.

SB: When they get to school they begin to cross with these people of a different culture, if you will. It hits them when they're at school. It probably starts in playschool. I literally have seen lots of conversations, "I am not a farmer. I am a rancher" or vice versa.

BB: I can remember when we started school at the country school that was two miles away.

MG: Here?

BB: Yes –

MG: Is it still here?

BB: No, it's been gone for twenty years.

MG: Where was it or what was its name?

BB: Cypress Lake. Its original name on its original site was "Gopher", real outstanding, classy name. The area where it was built by 1920 had been depopulated, so they moved it up close to Cypress Lake where people were still living on the farms and I started school there in 1951, or 1950 I guess it was. At that time, the school year started in February. We didn't have a summer break, except maybe for a short period. School ran from early February on until the end of June and then we took a short break and then started again and we ran until Christmas. Then we had a six week break over late December, January and early February there was no school when it was too cold and stormy and you couldn't make it there anyways. It was my first year and I started a new school year in February, but the next year we were modernized, and the new school year started in August, so everyone's school year that year got shortened by months, so I only had six months of school that in Grade 1!

Our school district switched in 1954 when they went to the school buses and went to the towns. Our district was cut right down the middle. We went to Robsart School then, and our neighbours to the west went to Consul. If you had gone to Robsart, then you definitely knew that Consul was the social dregs of the world. Do you ever watch "Corner Gas"? You know Dog River and the other place? That is very much the way it was. That's the nature of the human beast. We have to find ways to distinguish between us and somebody else.

SB: You went on horseback.

BB: Yes, I rode horse to school up until grade four.

SB: Behind Elaine.

BB: When I was young and first going, I didn't have my own horse, I had to ride behind my sister on the horse to school. [?].the horse all the way home. I knew it was a threat.

MG: Is she still in the region?

BB: Yes, we farm with her.

SB: She lives on the ranch that we got from Norm Tenborg.

BB: She lives down there. She's the operator, I guess you could say.

MG: The ranch, not the farm?

SB: She probably is a rancher. This family division!

BB: I guess the one thing that I would like to add is my cousin worked on the construction of the dam. This was done before I was born, so I didn't have anything to do with it. This was an older cousin who worked on it and the interesting thing was, from his perspective, was that the job wasn't to build a dam, it was to keep people busy. When he talked about all the things they did it

was always to extract the maximum amount of work out of any job to make it last as long as it could. The best example he gave me of this was they did concrete work to build the structures on the dam, so they would have to bring gravel over to where the dams were to mix the cement. They had mechanical implements, and they pushed the dirt up to the top of the gravel pile and then they had men load the gravel truck with a shovel, because men could do that. They couldn't get rid of the dirt off the top effectively, but they could keep a lot of men busy shovelling gravel into the dump trucks to haul it to the cement plant.

SB: And the grader was sitting right there and could have scooped it in?

BB: The dozer, to push it into the truck, but they didn't do things that way. Make-work projects, and I don't know if they still have them in this day and age or not, but it was the thought process at that time. I guess we probably still have some.

MG: And the dam was built what year?

BB: 1937 to 1938. The lake was dry in 1937. I remember my cousin talking about working on both dams at the same time. The engineers had a trail that ran down the lake bed between the two dams while they were working.

MG: This cousin, what was his name?

BB: Lloyd Heglund. He died a couple years ago.