

CONSUL MUSEUM INCORPORATED
Oral History Collection – Section 2
Collected by Oral History Researcher Meagan Gough
Beulah Pettyjohn Interview 2008 March 07

Catalogue No. 2.16 (E,R)

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Conducted at the home of Beulah Pettyjohn, Maple Creek, SK

BP = Beulah Pettyjohn: Interviewee

MG = Meagan Gough: Interviewer

GP = Gordon Pettyjohn: Son, present as advocate

SP = Susan Pridmore: Videographer

Date of Interview – 2008 March 07

MG - So we are here at your house; would you like to introduce yourself, your first and middle names?

BP - Beulah Josephine Pettyjohn.

MG - And I know how old you are because of your special birthday, but what is your day of birth?

BP - February the 23rd, 1908.

MG - And whereabouts were you born?

BP - Grandview, Manitoba, at home. Dad went to get the doctor with the buggy, you know? He went nine miles into Grandview. No, mother had a lady helper – they used to have women come and help them years ago.

MG - So, more than a midwife; they would also stay at home and help with the chores?

BP - I don't know what she done afterwards, but I know she was there when the baby was born. She probably did. I don't know.

MG - So, what brought you to this part of the world?

BP - Well, my mother and dad and brothers moved out here. Before that, we had lived in Portage la Prairie, because there was no school in Grandview when I was born and so dad sold the farm and moved us to Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, and we went to

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school there, and he worked for the Five Roses Flour Mill. And then, when I come out here I come out to visit them, 'cause I was workin' down there. I was a seamstress. I learned the trade and have been sewing all my life. I made him (Gordon, her son, who is present during interview) a Salvation Army suit when he was twelve years old, and all they gave me was the 's' to put on the collar.

MG - Wow! You must have been involved in lots of interesting projects doing that.

BP - Yes, I suppose I was. Then, they come out here - we moved. Preston took me to a dance the first time and then we started goin' together. We got married in 1929 and lived at Merryflat.

MG - So, your husband is from here?

BP - Yeah, he farmed and ranched. Then, after ten or twelve years, I don't remember exactly, the grasshoppers flew in the country. They just came in like a big cloud in the sky. Like a big black cloud. They landed on the side of the granary and settled there for the night and they ate all the crops up, everything. So, we decided to go west, and he worked as a mechanic in Trail, B.C. Ten years we lived there and then moved back to the farm in 1951 because of Preston's health.

BP - We bought a cow when we got back. You paid \$300.00 (three hundred dollars) for a milk cow. She gave us twin calves, heifers. Took a lot of money to get started again, but we sold our house in Trail. We had a garage, and we sold that, too, and came back here and got started again. This was a good place to come back to. We bought our old farm with some more land. We stayed there until 1967 when he got sick, and we moved into town and got this house and have been here ever since. We sold our place to Keith, our son. Gordon and Marlene lived across the road from us at Merryflat.

MG - How many children do you have?

BP - Eight.

MG - I was reading the write-up in the paper about you, and that you were the postmistress of Merryflat for quite some time?

BP - I ran the post office at Merryflat for about ten years. It was a big place at one time. There were thirty-eight families out there, and we had a schoolhouse. We took the kids to the dances; we had old-time dances. Walter Boyd, he used to sing at all the old dances, and we would just dance all night, put the kids on blankets and put them to sleep. Everyone was so friendly, and they all met up. And there was showers and wedding dances, card parties and everything in the schoolhouse.

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BP - I had the post office in my house. We built a porch, a good size room, at the back of the house and Preston made boxes and put all the peoples' names on them, and people come mailed it, and I would put it in a bag and lock it up, and Lester Briggs used to haul the mail into Maple Creek. (Asks son) Did you haul the mail to Govenlock? Yeah, he hauled it to Govenlock for a few years. Now Govenlock is not even there anymore.

BP - Most of the little towns are gone that were down south of here – Senate, Govenlock, Vidora, Robsart. They all used to be big places at one time or another.

MG - So, when you were working as the postmistress, the mail used to just come in?

BP - The driver would come and get it and then take it to town and bring the other back, and I would take it and sort it, and put it in the boxes.

SP - How often would mail come?

BP - Once a week, and children would often come with Mom or Dad to get it. They might want a cookie or something. (to Gordon) You remember the time Teresa come over and had breakfast with us? They lived across the road, and they came over one morning, and they wanted porridge. Gordon came later and he said, "What are you doing up at Grandma's table? I gave you breakfast before you got here!" (laughing) They are so cute when they are little. I used to take in my mother, too, because there were no old-age homes, so when she got old I kept her in the summertime, and my sister in Calgary in the winter.

MG - What is her name?

BP - My mother was Sarah Forester.

MG - That's a big responsibility, caring for a parent like that, isn't it? And you had your kids, too.

BP - Well, they were pretty much grown up by that time.

SP - Did it just seem like the natural thing to do?

BP - Yes, it was the natural thing to do at that time. Electricity came here in 1953.

MG - Plumbing, too, indoor?

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BP - We did that ourselves. There was no running water in the house when we moved there. We actually dug a well in the basement, and then when electricity come in, we put a bathroom in the house.

GP - We had plumbing in Trail before we came back to the farm.

BP - Yeah, I didn't want to come back. I thought we would come back to what we left. We had no electricity, no power, no lights; coal-oil lamps, grasshoppers.

BP - I just thought about electricity and water in the house that I had in Trail.

BP - Soon after we came back, Preston put in a 32-volt system [wind charger and batteries] so we had electricity for many uses. Besides a wood stove, we had a propane range and an oil heater.

SP - That would have been an improvement, though. What did you have in Trail?

BP - Went from wood to coal before that. You know, I don't know why we cooked on wood in Trail, do you? Might have been in the house when we went there, 'cause we bought a house but then we built onto it. And the boys and neighbours dug a big basement under the house, and we put in a bedroom, a washroom and a coal room, as well as a stairway coming in from the outside.

MG - You must have had a busy household at times!

BP - I guess I did!

GP - Plus the neighbours!

BP - Eight kids plus the neighbours. Nothing ever bothered me. I just went along with it.

GP - Well, you got a lot of help from us. The older kids helped a lot, did housework and the like. Jim cooked porridge for everyone, June made lunches for the kids, and Art delivered papers. We all worked when we got big enough!

MG - What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in your life, that first come to mind?

BP - Oh, there are so many. The world now is nothing like it used to be, nothing! There are so many things now I am not even interested in – computers and things – I don't even care if I see it. All of my kids have email things, and stuff like that, but I am not interested in that. I have been living here since 1967, and my husband died in 1969.

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And I had a cancer operation in 1969 and I survived that. And I think I have done pretty good so far.

SP - You look wonderful, Mrs. Pettyjohn! I wouldn't for a minute guess you had had your 100th birthday!

BP - This little cane thing helps me – I can reach things and pick up things. I get homecare now. And do you know Cheryl? She is the homecare lady, and she was here this morning. She said she danced all night and didn't get home until four in the morning. I used to do that, too. Sometimes Merryflat is like that!

SP - But that Merryflat School can sure get a crowd for showers, parties, whatever.

MG - So who were some of your neighbours in Merryflat?

BP – Kate and Clarence Cochrane, Fred and Dora Anderson was our closest, and in later years, Preston's brother, Austin, lived down the road, and his brother Lee. We used to curl out there on the creek! We would clean off the creek, and we bought curling rocks, and we'd all go on Sunday and curl.

MG – That's fun! Outdoor curling!

BP – Ya, it was fun.

GP – Until the ice heaved.

SP – That would make it challenging.

MG – Just January, February or was it a short outdoor season?

GP – I don't know just how long it would be. Like I say, it was nice for awhile. You'd find a nice level spot, then the weather would change and the ice would heave, then you would have to try and find something else, but it was hard to find a nice long piece like that that's level.

SP – But you had actual curling rocks for that?

BP – Yes, we bought a second-hand bunch. The men did.

GP – From Robsart.

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SP – And curling brooms? Did you have actual curling brooms or just use the house brooms?

GP – No, we had curling brooms. Some would curl – like, Marlene and I curled, and Gaffs and Parsonages – they all curled, too, down in Consul. Then we decided to try this curling rink on the ice on Battle Creek.

BP – We had ball games all the time, and we went from place to place for tournaments. All of us played ball, too, on Merryflat. All the boys played ball, especially the older ones. “The Merry Battlers”, yes they were.

GP – And we had a skating rink on Battle Creek, too, down where Joan and Wilkes live.

BP – We took the kids down swimming every summer in the creek.

MG - Did you keep a lot of livestock at your place?

BP - Yeah, we had quite a few, a hundred or so head. We had about three or four horses, the rest were cattle. The horses were just for riding and purposes like that. Well, we farmed first with horses, until we got a tractor!

BP - One thing Preston did was we had a good size porch, and he put a hook up, so each child who came in hung his coat up and put his overshoes under his coat. Then in the morning when they got up to go to school, they made their own beds, even though I helped them to start with. No matter how messy it was, I never scolded them. I just kept at them until they did it good.

SP - Did you raise your own chickens?

BP – Yes.

GP - She baked lots of bread!

BP - You know, I baked up a hundred pounds of flour every month. And we ate a bag of potatoes every month, a hundred pounds. And every fall we always got in a big order - it would be one hundred pounds of white sugar, brown sugar, coffee, tea, whatever was necessary. Sometimes the roads were bad and you couldn't get to town. Too much snow. We didn't have good roads then.

GP – Couldn't find the road then. Traveled the hills, on top of the hills. Lots of times we'd go over the Grant Hill – you know where that is, Susan – that's the way you had to go to Maple Creek. Or all the way down to Consul and around. Even when we lived out

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there. And before that, there was more snow than there is now. Lots of those trips made. And everybody who ordered their groceries, you'd bring back a whole truckload.

SP - Was hunting something that Preston and the boys would have done?

BP - Preston never really liked hunting. Jimmy, and Keith was the biggest hunter, and then Raymond. They would get up in the morning, and get their deer, and be back in a couple hours. They loved to hunt.

MG – Did you end up with a preference for town or country life?

BP –Country living was a big adjustment. I came from the city. I went to school there, and I went to church and what not, but here was a different life altogether, but I liked it. We milked cows and made butter. The butter you buy in the store sure isn't real butter! We made ice cream. We would visit Grandma, and she would make it.

BP - I enjoyed living in both places, didn't make much difference to me. I was happy. Here in Maple Creek I belonged to Ladies Hospital Auxiliary and also the United Church Women. I played canasta with three or four groups, and I played bridge, so wherever I was at, I was happy.

SP - Did your children all go to Merryflat School?

BP - The two youngest ones did, and then the oldest Jimmy, June and Gordon went before we left for Trail, but Arthur studied here in Maple Creek. He's a minister and missionary. He was in the Philippines for years, then down in Indiana. I have seven senior citizens in our family!

SP - They are catching up to you!

MG - I have to ask, then, what do you think are some of the things that make a good life? What is a recipe for a good and happy life?

BP - Don't worry about nothing. Just learn to cope with it. You can. All my kids are happily married every one of them. They all have their husbands and wives, too.

SP - Do you know how many grandchildren and great-grandchildren you have now?

BP - Well, I think there's 23 grandchildren; I don't know how many great-grandchildren.

GP - Forty.

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BP - That's what the paper said. I just started to wonder if I counted right!

GP - But no great-great.

MG - Yet! So, the number one key to a good life, you feel, is to not worry too much?

BP - That's what I would say – you learn to cope with whatever goes on. You can do it! Just like when I had cancer. That was pretty scary, but it didn't worry me.

SP - Yes, because in 1969 they didn't know as much about cancer and how it was treated.

BP - Maybe not, but they used radiation on me and I was cured. I think that's a lot better than chemotherapy. I had to go to Regina for five years after and they would check me, but after that, they called me cured.

MG - How have you stayed healthy throughout your life?

BP - I don't know - looked after myself, eat healthy, played with my kids, played ball, took them to hockey games, had Grandma over, kept them happy.

SP - Mrs. Pettyjohn, do you remember years where you had very big floods, or snowstorms? Did they keep you trapped in the house even?

BP - Well, one morning, the snow was up over the barn, and they couldn't get in to feed the cows. So they had to climb up on the shed and crawl in the hayloft to go down into the barn to feed the cows and the horses. Another time, we had a storm over east of us, and all of the cows all went to the trees, and one got lost off of the trail and she got stuck in a snow bank and froze to death over night. But you couldn't go out and feed them because you couldn't take a tractor out in a blizzard.

MG - What year would that have been?

BP - I don't know, but it was before we went to Trail. We don't get a lot of storms like that.

BP - Our boys played hockey in Trail, not all of them, but some of them, but they liked ball.

MG - And you played ball, too.

BP - Yeah, when I was young.

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MG - What country were your ancestors from?

BP – [Scotland and Germany]. My mother came from the states, Indiana, and my dad met her down there and he brought her up. He's originally from Grandview, Manitoba.

MG - Did they ever talk about their journey to Canada from the United States?

BP - No, not really. See, Dad was working down there as a carpenter. Originally his mother and dad lived in Grandview, Manitoba, and then when he got married, he come back there. He started a farm up there and that's where I was born, along with one sister and two brothers. My baby sister died of spinal meningitis, way back when she was two years old. She is buried in Portage la Prairie. Her name was Gladys Ruth. And then Mary, my sister, and I went back there once, to visit one time, and we went to the cemetery. At that point Dad and Mother had never put a gravestone on for her, so I did - put a little one with a lamb on it. Only two years old when she died. Spinal meningitis was a terrible thing; she lived only four days and she was gone.

BP - (asks Gordon to go get photo of her at age 6 months). Our family is all dressed up so nice, and they have the worst-looking house you ever seen in the world! Dad is holding Mary, my sister. My brother is standing next to Mother. That was me when I was six months old.

MG - Look what it says on this picture: "taken in Grandview Manitoba in 1909" What a cute baby! Your place looks like a really cozy place to live, and your parents both look very happy, too.

SP - I wonder who would have had the camera to take the pictures.

BP - My grandfather had a camera, and I don't know if you ever seen one, but he would sit it outside on a stool and put a black curtain over it and he went under the curtain and took the picture, and then he would take it out and develop it in the dark room in the house.

MG - I wonder if it had those plates you use in the real old cameras. So that's probably one of the only photos you have from when you were that age.

BP - That's the only one. The next one was when I was seven or eight. But you know, Mother used to make us dresses, and she would sew them by candlelight! I don't know how she did it, but she sewed it by hand by candlelight.

MG - And the dress in your picture - the dresses are so sweet; they are really beautiful.

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MG - What was she like, your mom?

BP - She was a small woman, a real happy-go-lucky thing. I can remember, before I left the farm, when I was tiny, she always made us kneel in front of her and say a little prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take". She had us say that each night before we went to bed.

MG - So, she was a happy-go-lucky lady?

BP - She was; so was Dad. I only got one spanking in my life! Well, Dad gave me some money and sent me downtown to Portage la Prairie to buy a scribbler. I went to a different store to what he told me, and I got a different scribbler 'cause I thought it was bigger. I got a spanking because I went to a different store than he told me to go to. I disobeyed him.(To Gordon) Can you remember all that about your life?

GP - No! (Laughing) My life is not that interesting!

BP - I thought I made your life interesting!

GP - Well, things come back to you when you start talking.

MG - Yes, exactly. So, he was a happy man, too?

BP - He was; he played with the kids lots, too. Went riding with them and one thing and another.

SP - When you were farming, Mrs. Pettyjohn, at Merryflat, did you have to haul your grain quite a ways when you wanted to sell it?

BP - I think it was about twenty miles. They hauled it to Senate, Saskatchewan, with horses and a grain wagon.

SP - Do you remember how many bushels you could haul in one load?

BP - It would be forty. It took a long time.

GP - I remember going once and it took all day to get to Senate and back with a team and horses. We went into the store. A Chinese fella owned it, and I got some licorice balls.

MG - We have almost been talking for an hour!

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BP - That's gone by fast!

MG - Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not talked about?

BP - I don't know if there are any questions I have not answered.

MG - No, you have answered them beautifully. We just wanted to learn about your life.

BP - Well, I think I did the best I can.

MG - You did wonderfully.

SP - You did wonderfully.

MG - Thank you. It's a real honour to meet you and spend a little bit of time with you, and by sharing your stories, it will become part of the history books. It will allow people to better know where they came from in this part of the world, and, hopefully better equip them for their own futures, so thank you very much.

BP - See, Preston, his folks come from Missouri, and they lived in Regina. When he was eight years old, he and his dad went to Maple Creek. And he lived in the boxcar with the horses and the dogs and the machinery, and they unloaded here in Maple Creek. And then they went out to Merryflat in 1913. So, he was on the farm since he was eight years old.

SP - Quite the way to get here!

BP - They always said "Go west! Go west, young man!"

SP - They just never said how much work it would be when they got there!

BP - That's right, it was hard work, especially for a child. He comes from a big family, too.

MG - That's how you end up with forty great-grandchildren!

BP - I might have to recount them!

MG - That's great!

END

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PS. In December of 2008 Beulah became a resident of Eastend Wolf Willow Lodge. She became a great-great-grandmother in December 2009 and again in March 2010. Beulah passed away on November 24, 2011 at the age of 103.