

CONSUL MUSEUM INCORPORATED
Oral History Collection – Section 2

Collected by Oral History Researcher Meagan Gough
Helen Schmidt Interview 2008 March 13

Catalogue No. 2.23(E, R)

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Conducted at Helen Schmidt Home Site NW 20-4 26 W3 Near Consul, SK

HS = Helen Schmidt: Interviewee

MG = Meagan Gough: Interviewer

LS = Lawrence Schmidt (son): present during interview

Videographer: Emmelia Taylor

13 March 2008

HS: The important part here is to get the history of this place. I guess it was great great grandfather who started the irrigation here in 1903. He got the licence, or was applying for the licence to get the irrigation here.

MG: Do you mind if I take down notes while you talk or write extra questions while you are talking?

HS: No, I don't mind.

MG: Wow, 1903, I was just talking with Ira Blakley about irrigation. So that started in 1903?

HS: Yes, that is the year Mr. McKinnon applied for the licence to take water out of Battle Creek for irrigation, and then he built a dam up where the weir is now, and he started irrigating. Well, I am not sure what year they had the dam completed, but in 1912, it was wrecked with spring flooding and they had to rebuild it. Then by that time there were other people involved. There was Mr. Pete Reesor, David Wood, and they were getting easement from Sophie Richardson to go across her land with irrigation.

MG: An easement is a payment?

HS: Uh, you have to get permission to dig ditches across someone else's property, and in order for them to bring water down from Battle Creek to here to irrigate, they had to get what they called "easements" to come across these people's land with irrigation ditches.

MG: Wow. So that was the first group who....

HS: They were the first group who did this. Is there anyone else I missed in that group? I think that is pretty well it. And from that point on, the McKinnon irrigation and Richardson irrigation were taking place in—I am trying to think—about 1933. Mr. McKinnon passed away and his widow kept the place and so on until 1942.

MG: What is his first name?

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HS: James, James Junior, and he wrote it “James the younger”, a lot of the papers say “James the younger” because his father had also been out here. Sometime in the forties, Mrs. McKinnon found she couldn’t keep operating the place on her own, and so then PFRA [Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Association], who was purchasing other people’s property for irrigation—there was Wileys and Gilchrists who also had land already that were selling to the PFRA—so Mrs. McKinnon sold then, and that’s when the PFRA took over this project. And then when the Second World War was over, well, my husband came back over from overseas, and he applied. Well, first of all, Mrs. McKinnon had reserved the rights to the buildings on site when she sold. She wanted the buildings because of this great old house. When her grandson came back from overseas she applied for this particular quarter, and we got it through the PFRA, so we really can’t apply for this hundred year thing for operating a farm for a hundred years, because it was sold out to the PFRA for about four or five years.

MG: What is this “lease it for a hundred years thing”?

HS: It’s a heritage thing. If you had a farm or ranch for a hundred years and your family have operated it continually for a hundred years, you get a big plaque and so on, but we can’t apply for it because there was the three or four years while Alfred was in the service....

MG: Seems like a bit of a loophole, doesn’t it?

HS: Yeah. I got the application though, and it says “continuous”. Some of the family must have been continually living on the property, so anyhow, I didn’t apply.

MG: So your husband was, is a veteran?

HS: He was. He passed away eight years ago. But when he came back from overseas there, he came here and his parents lived with him for a while from about 1946-1950, and we were married in July of 1950. And then we took up residence here, and I have been here ever since!

MG: Continuously!

HS: [*laughing*] Yes, continuously! That’s right.

MG: It’s a beautiful spot here.

HS: I hope I never have to leave. There may be a time when I do, but....

MG: I noticed that there are a lot of interesting buildings on the property here. What are some of those?

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HS: The big one with the front face was a dance hall in Consul. It was built in 1915 and brought out here to this place in the fall of 1949. So they used it for a dance hall. There were stores on the first floor, but the dancehall was always up on the second floor, but it was condemned in the '40s, and so my father-in-law had it moved out here; that's it. It was a good building at one time, but it was built, like I say, in 1915, so it's saw a lot of years.

MG: So where is your family from, from Consul?

HS: No, my family was from Vidora actually. I was born on the farm straight east of Vidora actually, probably about three miles or something.

MG: And Vidora has undergone a lot of changes, hasn't it?

HS: It was quite a town at one point.

MG: So when you were growing up there, what was it like?

HS: Well, when I was three years old, my parents moved from there, six miles straight northeast, six or eight anyhow, to a district which was called "Oxarat". Have you heard of that?

MG: Mm-hmm.

HS: Ok, well then so we lived in the Oxarat district, and I went to school there until I was in grade 11, and I took my grade 11 in Consul. After that, I supervised at Oxarat for one year, and after that I got married and now here I am.

MG: So you are sharing the history of this place and some of the things that make this place a neat place to be and see change over the years.

HS: Well yes, the irrigation is really interesting. When I first came here, they were using ditches and canvases. I don't know if you understand irrigation at all, but in order to block the water off to make it go out onto the field, they would block it off in the irrigation ditches with canvases. Well, that worked for a while, but the land wasn't really level, so after that, we got heavy levelling equipment in and levelled the land, and all the neighbours pretty well did that also. And we built the ditches—the PFRA did—and they put in proper turnouts. And anymore, we use tiles to run the water out on the fields and so on, little dykes and so on, so it has changed a lot since I have been here. We have one big joke. We have a big ditch out here in front of the house, and Alfred, my husband, also put big canvases in there to stop the water. Well that's fine. I would go out and help him, and when we got done he says, "You know, that's the first time I ever

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put that canvas in without getting wet to the waist!" But then we looked at me; I was wet to the waist. He wasn't wet, but I was! So we always thought that was funny.

MG: That's funny!

HS: We thought it was anyway. It's something we never forgot. But irrigation has meant a lot. It has been the life of this community. It really has, for the livestock and so on. For years we were farming because we owned land south of Consul, and in 1967 and 1969, my husband put all of the farmland into grass. You know, crested wheat, alfalfa, rye grass. And from then on we were farming and haying the irrigation land, and that's still the way it is, eh. And we had sheep, a few sheep. Were you the girl who had sheep?

MG: No.

HS: Oh, there was a girl who came along a while ago who had sheep.

MG: No, not me. Back home, my grandfather had cattle, Holstein cattle.

HS: We always had beef cattle. We did spend a year milking cows and delivering milk to Consul, but that was just too much work to handle.

MG: Yeah, it is a lot of work. So, what is the history of ranching and farming in your family, you and your husband?

HS: Oh, it's been primarily, since he quit, grain farming, and we have been raising cattle. We calve the cows out here, then move them to our south place early in the spring. We put a good share of them in PFRA leases until fall, then bring them back out, bring them home and feed the calves, and then sell them in the spring, calve the cows out again in the spring, and that's how it goes!

MG: Are your kids all involved in the farm?

HS: No, just my son. I have a daughter, and she has four daughters, and they have given me eight great-grandchildren; and just one son and he has never married. And I always said, "If he had produced as well as my daughter has, we would have a really big family!"

MG: You sure would, you would have 16 great-grandkids.

HS: My son-in-law is in Tomahawk, Alberta, if you know where it is. It's west of Edmonton and a little south. Have you heard of Drayton Valley? Well, my grandkids went to school there, and my granddaughter lives close to there. And my son-in-law was a coal miner, working the coal mines up there, strip mining, not underground.

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MG: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in the community over the years related to farming?

HS: Differences in the size and type of equipment they use, difference in our haying equipment. Gosh, when I first came here we were using a mower, to pull behind the tractor, and what they call a “dump rake”. And from there we got rid of that and started using a swather, and I don’t know what year we started using the big round baler. We had a square baler before that, but we have two big round balers now and a self-propelled swather for doing the haying. So quite a change. And you see all these farmers with their big four-wheel-drive tractors. We don’t have that, but only because it isn’t required in what we are doing.

MG: What is the impact of having that big equipment?

HS: People packing up and selling out. We are getting fewer and fewer residents all the time. Between here and where our land is south of Consul there used to be about four families living there, at least, and now there is only one. My husband’s people had a farm and it’s now vacant. There are just so many vacant spots. This big equipment that covers so much land drives people out.

MG: Hard for the smaller farmer to survive.

HS: Yeah. Time will tell, won’t it.

MG: We wanted to enjoy this chance to talk to people on their own. What are some of the ways—I have found this really interesting to learn about—that people survived the hard times in the ’30s? Any stories that jump out at you? What about ways of stretching a dollar or keeping house and home together amidst such hard times?

HS: Well, of course, things were so different then. I mean my dad worked with his neighbours a lot, and then he went to what they called “the bush”, up in the hills and brought home timber and so on to use for corrals. And they sawed it up and made firewood and so on. And I mean, my dad was a real horseman. He always used horses; he never used tractors. He preferred to use horses. He took care of his own animals—milk cows, feed pigs. They had sheep, raised chickens, used them for food. Things were different. If you butchered a pig you cured the meat and rendered the lard and all those types of things. You canned the meat because you didn’t have freezers back then and so you would can it. We always went to the Cypress Hills to see if there was any possible chance we could pick berries! We picked saskatoons and gooseberries...they are kind of sour, but they make good canning.

MG: I pick saskatoons out in BC.

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HS: Yeah, but what about the gooseberries?

MG: I don't mind them, I just said "oh" to you because I didn't know you could pick berries around here. I never heard anyone mention that yet.

HS: In fact, one of the things I supposed that would be of interest is the fact that in 1937, the Cypress Lake went dry or practically dry. Did you ever hear that? Well, I am one of the few people who are still living who would have walked across that lake bottom, over to the other side of the lake, to help my parents pick berries. I was only about seven or something, but I can remember jumping across these big cracks in the ground where the lake bottom was, actually. Daddy couldn't take the team of horses across, because it was kind of soft, I suppose, so he tied them on some trees on the south side of the lake, and we walked across to the other side and picked berries. And I mean, it is one thing that has really stuck in my head. My sister was just a baby, and Mother carried her, but I can remember jumping across these great cracks in the lake bottom.

MG: Imagine that!

HS: There won't be too many people who remember that. My mom, of course. She's still alive; she would remember. But my sister was too young, and my dad's gone.

MG: Your mom's name is Mary....

HS: Ziegler.

MG: And your dad's name?

HS: Dan.

MG: Yeah, people were mentioning to speak to your mom as well.

HS: Oh yes, she came through the hard times. She can tell you about what the hard times were.

MG: Where did they immigrate from?

HS: They came from England when she was 18 months old, and my dad came up from North Dakota when he was about 10 years old.

MG: Where in England was she from, do you know?

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HS: I don't know right now. I've got it in my family information, but I can't tell you right now.

MG: My family came from England.

HS: I think my grandmother actually lived near London, but I can't tell you where my grandfather and grandmother lived after they were married. Mother had a picture on her wall in her living room of the house she was born in.

MG: And what is your date of birth?

HS: February the 28th, 1931. Does everybody tell you that? Some of us prefer not to!

MG: Everyone so far has, yes, even if they prefer not to. But hey, the further back the years go, the more credentials you have. It's not a bad thing!

HS: I ask because some people wouldn't want to, but you haven't found them.

MG: Many of the people I have interviewed are over 90!

HS: My mom's memory is getting kind of.... She can't compute the same way. She called here just before dinner because she had lost her one phone, her hand-held.

MG: So some of the ways they survived the '30s was they.... What are your memories growing up?

HS: I remember hot weather and the cold weather. Dad would take us out when it was really cold. I remember I drove a horse on a toboggan a lot of years, because once my sister was able to go, I was the teamster. I drove her on it. In the summer, my dad had a buggy for us to use, and I would drive it. You had to unhook your horse and tie it in the barn, and when school was out you had to hook your horse up again and drive home.

MG: Wow, and who were your neighbours growing up? Who were some of the families you grew up with?

HS: Wenzels. Have you interviewed them?

MG: No, not yet.

HS: Johnsons, even though there are no Johnsons left now; they are all gone. Melvin Wenzel, he would have been in school when I was. There were McElroys, but their family is all gone. Most of the people, like the kids that I went to school with, are gone.

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The families are gone. Kay Wilcox, she went to the same school I did, Oxarat. Some Pridmore boys. They were younger though. Their mother was a teacher.

MG: Jim's wife? So Pridmore kids, Jim's kids?

HS: Yes, Brian and Bob. There is Scott and Wade and Dale who are grandsons.

MG: Right. Did you grow up near the Parsonages at all?

HS: No.

MG: So what was the community like when you were growing up in Vidora?

HS: Well, it was Oxarat, really, where I grew up. They were pretty close-knit. They had card parties at the school, dances, and of course, our famous Christmas concerts!

MG: Oh, tell me about this! I haven't heard about it, as I have not interviewed any of those families. What are your famous Christmas parties?

HS: Well, we always had a Christmas concert, and we put on a really good Christmas concert with Millie Pridmore, who was my teacher for most of the years, and she was really good at organizing things. Gladys Johnson always played the piano and, of course, Santa would come, you know.

MG: And what have been your own interests over the years?

HS: I belonged to the Oxarat 4-H club. I was the first secretary when they organized in the late-'40s, and I belonged to the Homecraft Club when I was a girl. Afterwards I got to be a married woman, moved down here. Of course, my husband was a Legion member, so I joined the Ladies Auxiliary for the Legion. When I was still at home in Oxarat, I went and took a course in Swift Current, a summer camp I guess you'd call it. A co-operative trying to encourage us all to become co-op members. And I took in a church group in Arrowwood, Alberta. The Brethren Church in Vidora and some of the young people went to Arrowwood to church camp. And then once married, I was the president of the Home and School for a while. But mostly, my main interest, once I got married, was this place. I was out helping my husband with the calving, the seeding. I was out doing most anything.

MG: Wow, well that's kind of unique to be raising your babies and helping so much?

HS: My mother-in-law was a great help. She would come and kind of take care of the kids, and I worked out pretty much like a hired man most of the time. I ran the tractors, did the haying, summerfallowing, rode my horse!

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MG: So who taught you all that?

HS: Well, I learned to ride my horse, and chase cattle, and calve out cows, I guess, at home with my parents. And then when I came down here I hadn't really run a tractor, but after I got married I started running a tractor. I still go out and feed cows on the tractor now and again. But I have spent many, many hours on haying equipment, baling and so on. Lawrence went to school in Calgary, for four years?

LS: Three years.

HS: Well, while he was gone, I pretty well did all the baling. Alfred did all the swathing and so on, and I did the baling. So I have been an outside girl, shall I say. When I was at home, I was my dad's hired hand, because my sister was five and half years younger, so who helps Dad? Well, I did. And when I got married I just kept going outside and helping. But my mother-in-law, like I say, spent quite a lot of time here helping with the kids. They would drive up here in the morning and when the work was all done, they would go down to their place for the night and so on, and we would have our kids and time in the house, but that was through the summertime when the workload was heavy. Then my in-laws moved to Consul and built a house in 1964. Well, by that time the kids were getting big, but she still helped out. But of course, this had originally been her home, my mother-in-law's home.

MG: What was her name?

HS: Lena McKinnon. Of course, when she was married it was Schmidt, but she was Jim McKinnon's daughter, and as I said, it was Jim McKinnon who started this irrigation. She was Lena McKinnon and then she became Schmidt, and it was her one and only son that I married. She didn't have any other children.

MG: Wow, so with that first irrigation, it must have really changed life around here.

HS: Yes, it did, because like, when they came down here the land wasn't surveyed yet here. The survey stopped two miles north of here and they decided —they must have had almost like squatter's rights—and they decided that they wanted to be. It was hard to tell just how far it was, but they used a chain between, tied a man's legs with a certain-length chain, and he walked so many steps from where the land was surveyed to find out where they could put buildings. It's one of the stories written in "Our Side of the Hills", if you are getting one of those books. The McKinnon family story will be in there.

LS: The mail used to come from way up by Wilkes Parsonage's, Battle Creek Post Office. That's where McKinnons had to ride, up there to get the mail.

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