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Oral History Collection – Section 2
Collected by Oral History Researcher Meagan Gough
Norm Tenborg Interview 2008 March 12

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Location of Interview Norman Tenborg's home 111 5th Ave, Maple Creek

NT = Norman Tenborg

MG = Meagan Gough

SP = Susan Pridmore, Videographer

Recorded with video camera (DV tape)

MG: Well, it's March the 12th, 2008 and we are here at Mr. Tenborg's house.

NT: Mr. Tenborg? How about Norman.

MG: Ok, Norman! I just want to say how good it is to see you again.

NT: I thought maybe you'd left the country and we'd never see you again!

MG: No, definitely not, just needed to get through my classes and get myself organized to get back down here, you know, it takes time, but here we are again! Well, I never learned your full name. Norm...Tenborg...and your middle name?

NT: Henry – but don't tell anybody that!

MG: We will have to black out parts of the interview starting with your middle name!? And what is your date of birth?

NT: 1917, 28th of January.

MG: And, where did you grow up?

NT: Mostly here in Saskatchewan I guess. I was only two months old when they brought me to Canada, I didn't have much of a say in it.

MG: Where did your family emigrate from?

NT: Minnesota.

MG: Wow, really? Where in Minnesota?

NT: Down in the southeast corner, down by Wisconsin. I found that out when I went back there, I don't remember it.

MG: So, they came up in 1913 then?

NT: They came up in 1913 and they went back there after.

MG: What were your parent's names?

NT: Ethel Susan, and just Albert, he didn't have a second name.

MG: So, how did you get your Tenborg name?

NT: He carried the Tenborg name. He came up here with two brothers, he and another brother, the oldest and the youngest all came to Canada.

MG: Did they have stories about coming up here?

NT: They should have, but I never heard any! They shipped – there were three families that all came up together, the Tenborg's and another family that was related to that side of the Tenborg's and they unloaded their stuff in Maple Creek and it was on wagons and then they came out across the Hills.

MG: Wow, and once they came across the Hills did they settle there?

NT: Well, they already had homesteaded it when they first came out here. They came out in twelve I think and found the land they thought they wanted and built shacks on it.

MG: Is that the location where you grew up?

NT: Pretty much, yeah; south and west of Consul, along Battle Creek.

MG: That's such nice country along Battle Creek there.

NT: Except the beavers had cut all the willows off. Something about a willow, the beaver cut it and it never comes back, so it's a pretty barren little creek now. I don't know what kind of willows they call them.

MG: Did your parents ranch or farm?

NT: They farmed. Dad, he liked milk cows. That's what he had done in Minnesota, and that's what he wanted to do here. He decided he was gonna get rich raising wheat! (laughs)

MG: So no more milk cows, eh?

NT: In a way, no. He was more of a mixed farmer then. He enjoyed what he was doing.

MG: So, did you work at home on the farm with him?

NT: Yeah, until I left home. I think I left home when I was about 18, got around the west a little bit and then I came back and helped with the farm, 'cause they were getting old and we had to take it over and we were stuck with it, but I didn't farm.

MG: You just ranched on that land?

NT: Yeah put them on the grass, which should have been all the time.

MG: Your parents, when were they born?

NT: My dad was born in 1880, and my mother was born in 1886.

MG: What did your dad think about you straight ranching that land?

NT: Well, he was getting to such a state that it didn't make much difference to him. He died when he was 74.

MG: Good long life for his generation, isn't that?

NT: My mother died when she was 93.

MG: Oh my gosh! Wow, good genes in your family, as is evident in you – you've got the youth genes!

NT: Didn't have his. All we inherited from my dad was cancer. Everyone in the family.

MG: Including you? You survived cancer? How –

NT: Yeah, in the bowel. A lot of us did. In fact, my sister had cancer. She's 96 and she had the

same operation.

MG: You are the baby?

NT: No, there are two kids younger than me

MG: How many siblings all together?

NT: Seven. They thought big, I guess! Yeah, my sister and I are the only ones left.

MG: Your older sister? That's great.

NT: She lives in Calgary and always said she'd never live anywhere else, but she's getting tired of part of it, the crime and the like – she used to think it was the place to be, but not anymore. Her family grew up there too.

MG: So when you took over your family property, how long did you stay there?

NT: Well, quite awhile, until the summer of '76, but it changed a lot; we didn't live in the same place or anything.

MG: So, when you went back there and took it over, were you married then?

NT: Yes.

MG: And your wife's name?

NT: Dorothy May. Dorothy May Anderson.

MG: One of the Andersons!

NT: One of the Merryflat Andersons

MG: How did you two meet?

NT: Well, I guess we knew each other for quite awhile. She got married and he died. I came along and we weren't married until 1964. I got married late, I was about 45 or 46 till I got married – nobody wanted me! Dorothy had a son, and he married a girl in BC and they had twins, a boy and a girl. That was it. They were pretty special, too. Now I have six great-grandkids and they are pretty special too!

MG: And one of them is going off to the Olympics! So what kind of work were you doing?

NT: When I was down around in Montana, I was on construction jobs and that kind of stuff. We put in a phone line in the west side of Glacier Park and we cut the right-of-way and then eventually strung a wire through there. Now that's all dammed down there.

MG: Would you go off working for a few months at a time?

NT: Probably, yeah, they weren't the same jobs anyway.

MG: So you got to travel a lot?

NT: Well, I would have liked to travel more, but, money was pretty scarce then. If you didn't ride the rods you didn't get anywhere then.

MG: What kind of work were you doing in the thirties when things were so difficult?

NT: Ranched and farmed, a bit of both never got into any construction work. Well, I worked on the Fort Peck Dam in 1936 and it was flood control and power. They had tunnels. three tunnels.

through the mountains with turbines in there that ran the Missouri River into it. It was good, real good. There were 11,000 (eleven thousand) men working there at the time, so it was –

MG: Wow! Eleven thousand men! Where were the women?

NT: They musta went into hiding! There was some of them there working, but men came from everywhere across the US and left their women behind, I imagine.

MG: Oh my gosh! It's a whole town of men! It must have been pretty wild!

NT: To start with it was wild! It was wide open, like the old west when they started out, but I missed that era, but my brother-in-law, he was there. Oh yeah, they had dance hall singers and they'd throw silver dollars at her and that, but I never got into that. I never had any silver dollars to throw!

MG: Oh, I see! (Laughing). So what did you do for fun up there?

NT: Well, there were shows and Fort Peck was a place. They made a town out of it. There was nothing there but the river bottom there before, but they had good stores and theatres there and it was nice. We had fun, we only worked, well, the place never shut down. It ran twenty four hours a day. There were lights at night though, so it was just like working in daylight.

MG: They ran electricity through there, or they had lanterns?

NT: They had electricity, oh yeah, it was pretty modern. When did I say I was down there? 1936. Everything was modernized then.

MG: Did you ever get homesick?

NT: Not really. But see, it wasn't too awfully far from here. Fort Peck was 90 miles east of Havre, on the Missouri River.

MG: Mostly Americans or Canadians working on that project?

NT: Americans.

MG: So you had to have dual citizenship, I guess?

NT: Yeah, still do I guess.

MG: That comes in handy. So, it was probably just wild around there. I just keep thinking of eleven thousand men in one spot. Do you have memories of any co-workers in particular that jump out? A nice group.

NT: Not really, they were calm like me.

MG: Serene –

NT: Yeah.

MG: Eleven thousand serene men in one place must have been quite a sight! (laughing)

NT: Not all of them on in one shift. We had shacks built on the side of the Missouri River that you didn't even know were there until you got up to them. They were pretty crude and a lot of them lived there, because there was no place to live. They had to move in farm shacks and the like into Wheeler.

MG: Wow, and Wheeler is near Fort Peck?

NT: Glasgow was really the town

NT: Glasgow was really the town.

MG: So what would a typical day have been for you in those days?

NT: Well, that's pretty much all I ever did was pour cement. Every week, they had us pour cement. That was for the trash gates and troughs. The tunnels were all built before I got there. I worked eight hour days, a forty hour week.

MG: This wouldn't have been a make-work project would it?

NT: It might have been, it might have started like that. They had other ones around there and they needed the power. That's probably what they had in mind when they started.

MG: So, in 1936 you would have been 19 years old, so then after you were done on that project, where did you head off to?

NT: The west side of Glacier Park. That's when I put the telephone line through. After I got done there, I don't remember what I did. I came back here for a while.

MG: So, you have worked with horses a lot in your life, haven't you? How did you become inspired to do that?

NT: Well, a horse, they didn't have too many brains...I would rather have worked with horses than those stinking old tractors! I never did like tractors too good. Horses were plentiful, and my dad worked horses until 1940 when he quit.

MG: How many horses would you have had on your property near Consul?

NT: Whatever they needed.

MG: Did you rodeo at all?

NT: No, none. A spectator. Never missed any.

MG: So you like them, 'cause I remember talking with you about rodeos. Is that one of the things people would do for entertainment?

NT: Yes, it sure was. Because even on a Sunday in the summertime they would have a little one, there was always an old milk cow to ride or something. I remember a neighbour kid and I - I don't know how old we were - but anyways, we were riding the milk cows and they were performing, and we had a good old dog and she nipped the cow and she lost it. That was my rodeo career there!

MG: That was the highlight of your career!?

NT: Yeah, when the dog bit the cow!

MG: You probably had lots of dogs and cats your whole life, eh?

NT: Yeah, had a dog most of my life. We had a little white one when we moved in here, but she had to be destroyed so that was the end of the dogs.

MG: What did people do for fun when you were in your twenties and thirties?

NT: There was always a dance, never short of them. Everybody played something.

MG: Did you?!

NT: I chorded a little on the guitar. That was it!

MG: You used to play a little bit? Any favourites?

NT: No, not really. There could be, but I forgot them. I'd pack the guitar on my back and ride the horse into the dance. used to love dances.

MG: And there would be live music there? What were some of their names?

NT: I had a neighbour, by the name of Herb Wilcox, and my mother taught him to play the violin, so he played. And I had a cousin who played the violin, and my mother played the piano or organ, whatever was there.

MG: So then, what year did you and Dorothy get married, then?

NT: 1964, the 26th of March; I am doing pretty good remembering all that!

MG: Really good! I can hardly remember last week! Well, the dates at least!

NT: Pretty much had to remember that, didn't want to forget an anniversary.

MG: Before that were you a confirmed bachelor?

NT: Yeah, I suppose so. Nobody wanted me!

MG: Maybe you just had high standards?!

NT: No, I wouldn't think so, no.

MG: Where did you get married?

NT: In Eastend, that white church on the corner, I don't know why we picked Eastend. My sister lived there then, but maybe the preacher was cheap!

MG: I guess if money was tight! Did you have a party back then, too?

NT: We had a dance back in Consul. We went to the farm and had a reception. That was about all the excitement.

MG: I had a question I had wanted to ask you – what is the difference between a rancher and a farmer?

NT: A rancher he raises cows, and a farmer, he raises grain. Of course, most of them are mixed farmers – they raise grain along with the cows.

MG: Do ranchers see themselves as different from farmers, or vice versa?

NT: You bet they do! They see a class difference.

MG: That's what I am curious about from talking with people.

NT: I have worked both ends of it, but all I know was that I hated farming and I liked to ranch. Ranchers had a lot better life, they could always sell a cow and get a few bucks, or sell grain as a once a year deal. That's probably all I know about that.

MG: Thanks, I am just curious. I have learned you wouldn't want to call a rancher a farmer or vice versa.

NT: It always used to be if you were a rancher you were pretty sure you were the better one.

MG: So, there have been pretty big changes in ranching and farming over the years that you have seen?

NT: Big changes. They now have big enormous tractors, but ranching didn't change that much. Change from horse power to tractor power would probably be the biggest change and that has more impact on the country that I know of.

MG: Did changes like that change the mentality of people in any way?

NT: I don't know if it changed their mentality, but it changed their way of life. Not much change for the rancher, we haven't really changed much for a hundred years, more modern methods I suppose, but it's putting up hay for the cow and feeding it.

MG: So what is the best part of this way of life? If you had grandkids who wanted to become ranchers or farmers, what would you say was the best part of this way of life?

NT: Ranching. It's probably a warped perception on my part because farmers have a good life, too. None of our kids got into either farming or ranching. They have construction outfits and the younger ones haven't decided yet.

MG: How many kids altogether do you have?

NT: One stepson, two twin grandkids and six great-grandkids. We thought we were all through the great-grandkids, but my granddaughter was 42 and got pregnant! So, we went out to Vancouver and everything was OK, and she's raising that little girl. She's a year and a half. She's something else that kid. She wouldn't walk one step outside or at their house and she got here in the house and she wouldn't stop walking here in the house. Her name is Hannah Marie. I don't see them all that much. They are in B.C. and they have work to do and don't get all the way down here again.

MG: Where are they in BC?

NT: Christina Lake, west of Trail – it's a summer resort.

MG: A lot of people from around here went out to Trail, B.C. at one point or another.

NT: Yeah, they did that to get a job – usually at the smelter. They worked there; there were a number of them.

MG: In fact yesterday, I was talking to a man named Louis Stetar, the Pettyjohns –

NT: Yeah, Dorothy's brothers all went out there and they all worked in the smelter. I missed going up to the smelter by this much – I wanted to go out there, but I was working at the time and I never did get back out there to work.

MG: I had wanted to ask you about whether there were any stories from our last interview that you wanted to share – work stories, growing up near Consul.

NT: There was quite a big change in that country when they dammed Cypress Lake and they had water for irrigation. That was the big change in that country.

MG: Did you work on the irrigation project or the dam?

NT: No, I didn't work on the dam, but I worked afterwards as a ditch rider for two years on the project. The old timers had tried to do their own irrigation projects, but they didn't turn out too good because they had to move dirt with horses and scrapers. Has anyone ever mentioned the name "Badger" to you? They had a ranch down there on Battle Creek. He worked on the irrigation project, and it washed out on him the first year, and he just sat back and never worked on it again. It discouraged him that much.

MG: What was his first name?

NT: Hannibal Badger. I don't think you wanted to call him that though! Everyone in his whole life called him "Badger".

MG: He didn't like going by "Hannibal"?

NT: No, and you couldn't blame him for that!

MG: What year did he try to do that?

NT: Oh that would have been in the early 1900's. See, when he homesteaded there, the Saskatchewan Government, they would put water on land and even some on that two townships - that Badger had two townships of ranch land, which was a lot of land! But when his irrigation project blew up, he just had to give up. He worked for I don't know how many years to build the weir and it washed out on him, and he hauled the rocks, picked them off the prairies. There was a weir down by our place, just across the fence from us, and it was built in about - after Badger's, I think - and they just kept adding to it and they still use it to get water out of Battle Creek.

MG: They still do from that!? Wow. I was going to ask you - what was the set-up with water when you were a kid living on Battle Creek?

NT: The weir was down below us. The land we required it for was down below, so then we had irrigation for hay. Water in that country is darned scarce, drinking water, but we were lucky because we had a well drilled, one hundred and ninety-six feet down, and it probably would have flowed if we'd run it in a different place, but you couldn't pump it dry.

MG: Who is there now?

NT: Backmans.

MG: Who, Blair and Sheila?

NT: No, the girl.

MG: Elaine?

NT: Yeah. It's funny when they came by to buy the place, it wasn't just them. There were many of them who came by to check out the place, but when they crossed Battle Creek it was running, so that was your water supply. They wanted a well. They didn't want to take a chance on the creek running dry, and for that you can't blame them.

SP: That creek has gotten low a number of times, hasn't it?

NT: Oh yeah, in the summer and it has probably in the last year or two, I don't know what would have kept it going - it wasn't rain!

MG: I had wanted to ask you a little bit about your neighbours growing up. Who was in that area?

NT: Sterlings, the Stetars - they only lived three miles from us, quite a few relations out there.

MG: So Stetar's place is right by where you grew up? I was just there yesterday and that is one of my favourite places in this whole country - all that rolling hills by the creek - what a nice place to grow up.

NT: Louis is quite a knowledgeable person for what chance he had. There was the Frenchs; the Wilcoxs would be all the neighbours in close there.

MG: Louis had mentioned the flood of 1952 - were you impacted by that too?

NT: The flood? Oh yeah, yeah. That was a flood alright - Battle Creek Valley was completely full of water!

MG: When you dip down the hill overlooking the creek - that was all full of water?

NT: Yeah.

MG: So did you get trapped?

NT: No, well we probably didn't know it!

MG: You're only trapped if you try to get out, I guess!

NT: It delayed everything for quite awhile that spring, or summer it was I guess. The bridge at Reesors - you know that one - it was out and you couldn't travel there, couldn't get there.

MG: Did you lose any animals, Norm?

NT: No, not that I can think of. It came later enough in the spring, so that they were pretty much all up on high land on the grass then. We didn't lose any, but neighbours did because I know lots of dead cows came floating down the creek – even a dead dog! There was a loss of life there, alright.

MG: That would have been quite a sight to see all that.

NT: Yeah, the water – it was an unbelievable amount.

MG: Do you remember the grasshoppers? Did that hit you hard where you were?

NT: Yes, I do! Yes, they hatched that one spring and destroyed the crop; there was no crop. As soon as the grain came out of the ground, the grasshoppers were there to eat it all. That's the only really bad grasshopper year I can remember.

MG: That was 1937, the grasshopper year?

NT: They flew in the fall of 1939 and laid their eggs, then hatched in spring of 1940 and cleaned the fields off. Grass and fields and everything, and then flew out.

MG: Yuck! One of the things I had wanted to ask you too was, in meeting you and getting to know you, you have such a wonderful attitude and “joie de vivre”, or “joy of life” as the French say, and I just wondered if you had any words of wisdom or tips to live a good life.

NT: No, not really. I suppose I should have “don't drink” and all that stuff, but I don't think that's right. You'll live just as long. Probably if you don't drink, it just seems longer!

MG: (Laughing) Oh, that's funny, I'm sure there are moments it would seem longer! I agree!

NT: I don't think there are a whole lot of things that are bad for you. They say now they aren't all that bad for you.

MG: So, would your advice be “live the life you want to live”?

NT: Well, I don't know, probably – couldn't do a thing about it anyways!

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