

CONSUL MUSEUM INCORPORATED
Oral History Collection – Section 2
Collected by Oral History Researcher Meagan Gough
Don Kisell Interview 2007 August 24

Catalogue No. 2.5 (E,W)

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Conducted at Kisell Home Site NW17-4-26-W3

DK = Don Kisell: Interviewee
MG = Meagan Gough: Interviewer
NJT = Nancy-Jean Taylor: Camera

August 24, 2007

*(**off-camera question about when Don's family came to the area)*

DK: I would guess they came here, about 1912, when he was a year old, from Broderick, Saskatchewan. They lived on Battle Creek about nine miles southwest of town. That's where he grew up. Then in the '30s sometime he moved out to Trail, B.C. to make a living like a lot of prairie people did, because it was such a dust bowl down here. A lot of people left.

MG: Oh, really?

DK: He went out there and met my mother and that's where I was born, in Trail, B.C. They came back here when I was a year old, which was in '42, and I've pretty much been in the Consul area ever since. He did work for Art Rotnem for I think it was a year and got to be a pasture manager on the Nashlyn Community Pasture and worked for them until, well, the spring of '49. He probably left there in April and went and started farming on his own. He did his own farming and raising cattle until he passed away. Well, he did actually quit because he had diabetes and lost a leg so he couldn't do anything. Once he lost his leg we had to transfer him around. He was probably 84 before he lost his leg, so he worked on the place until he was 84, which was a long time. He used to tell stories about when he was eleven years old. They would go riding in the lease there. He said they could ride all day and maybe see one deer or one antelope. He was born in '11 so that was about 1922. He said he'd maybe see one deer or antelope in a day. He always figured that was because at that time there were no dams or dugouts. The only source for water for animals was Battle Creek and the odd other thing. After farmers got putting in dams and dugouts, the antelope and the deer started increasing because they had water sources here and there. That was his story about that. It makes sense. If they don't have places to go and have a drink - like we were talking about water at the start there. That's a big difference there, I guess, is on the water and the animals.

MG: He must have seen some big changes in his life.

DK: Oh, yeah, that's for sure, from farming with horses to getting tractors. One thing he never could stand was a damn tractor with a cab on it. Glass gets dirty and you can't see. He didn't mind sitting in a truck or car, but tractors were too dirty.

I guess I have been here since I was a year old, and I went to school about six miles south of Consul in a little one-room school called Lammermoor. Now that school sits

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just east of the Co-op Bulk in town. It's just an old building there on Schmidt's land. That was the school I went to for quite a few years. We moved into town in 1954 from the farm and I started going to school in Consul. I didn't go to school that long. I went part way into Grade 9. Me and the principal, we didn't get along that well and I thought I had better things to do than go to school. I never did like paperwork and I still don't.

MG: I should ask before we go on what your father's full name was.

DK: Joseph Edward Kisell. My Grandpa Kisell - I don't know his second name - but he was Joseph Kisell, too. He was Joseph Kisell Sr. and Dad was Joseph Kisell Jr. That created lots of mail problems which Dad didn't like. He'd get Grandpa's mail and Grandpa would get his. That created problems, too. My mother's name was Helen Iva Kisell. She was originally a Quance. You were talking about the Reesors in Ontario. We found out not many years ago.... My sister has a bowling arena in North Battleford and every year they have a bowling conference thing. She was going to Niagara Falls and we had always wanted to go there so we went with her. On the way down there she had communicated with people who weren't actually related to us anymore, but their parents were involved and we got to see where the Quances originated in Ontario. My Grandpa Quance come from down in that country (I forget what the town's name was) and then he moved to Robson, B.C. That's where my mother was raised. I guess it ended up that when Dad was working in the smelter in Trail, he and a lot of the people working in Trail didn't have a place to stay, so they had a bus or car they took back and forth from Castlegar and Robson to go to Trail and work there. That's where he met my mother and that's where my older sister was born, in Trail, B.C. My younger sister was born in Maple Creek. We're kind of scattered around.

MG: So your sisters were born in B.C.?

DK: Well, my older sister was. The youngest one was born in Maple Creek. She was an afterthought, I guess.

I went to work for the L.I.D. [Local Improvement District] which was my first actual time away from home; well, it was south of town. At one time there was the municipality in the Consul area and further south was the L.I.D.

MG: So what is the L.I.D.? Is it a place?

DK: You know what a municipality is, like the R.M. here?

NJT: It was like an improvement district.

DK: Yes, an improvement district; they did the same work as the municipality only they were a different area. The municipality took over the L.I.D. So when I was young, I used to do some haying, and I worked for the L.I.D. that one time, and eventually worked for the PFRA. Actually, I spent 33 1/2 years working for the PFRA. I started working for PFRA for a fellow called Johnny Hanson. He was the boss. I started working in 1959 and stayed with PFRA most of my life. I did pasture improvements for years. I worked for Pasture Improvements in '59 and '60. In '61 I didn't have a job. We

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were married by then. We got married in 1960 and went up to the South Saskatchewan River, the Empress/Leader area, and worked for a farmer up there for two years. Then we came down here and worked for PFRA again on construction. At that time, the Moose Jaw PFRA did all the big construction, and they were working along the west end of Cypress Lake because the water was so low. They were going to put pumps in the lake to get the water out. The first job I did with them, we'd get a little poly rope and put three sticks of dynamite around it and tape it. We'd wrap a ton of dynamite at a time and we were out on a raft in the lake. We pushed the raft along and tramped this dynamite into the lake in mud and then blow it off and that's how we made the first trench on the west Cypress Lake for the pumps. So I did that construction for a year, trenching and doing dynamite and put in a structure on the west end in the outlet canal. Later in the summer, we worked on East Cypress and put in the concrete structure that's the inlet structure now. Then in late fall we went down to Val Marie and put in some wooden structures there.

MG: Who taught you how to use the dynamite?

DK: Our boss, Dan Greenley did. Oh no, it wasn't him. Leonard Lwegwood [spelling?] was his name. He had a crew of his own. Nobody was experienced with dynamite except him. When the blasting was going on, Leonard Lwegwood would come down and show you how to do this. He had his papers. I'd have liked to go to work for him; he was a super good guy, full of fun, but I stayed with the guy I started with. So that was 1963, I guess it was, and then in wintertime I was on unemployment for a while and then Johnny Hanson, who I used to work for with Pasture Improvements, he come up to our house in town and wondered if I wanted to go piling bush, knocking bush down and piling it. So I ended up doing that.

MG: Where was that?

DK: West of Saskatoon in the Asquith area. I'm not sure of the name of the pasture; there are so many pastures. It was north and east of Asquith.

I piled brush that winter and I worked for Johnny Hanson again that summer. I'm trying to figure the years out here.

The next winter come along and he wanted to know if I would go down to Manitoba to do the same work, and I didn't want to leave my family that far behind. So my cousin went in my place. In the summer, I worked again for Johnny Hanson into the late fall and then I actually quit and come home. When you work for Pasture Improvements you work all over Saskatchewan on whatever pasture needed work done. The cousin that had piled brush the second winter, he got married and went up to Thompson, Manitoba, him and another fellow. I had no work and was looking for something different, so me and another fellow, Ken McCuaig, drove up to Thompson, Manitoba. You had to take a medical in The Pas and if you passed that then you'd go to Thompson and get a job. I went up there and worked a very short spell.

Well, I am backtracking a little bit here, but when we were down working at the pasture by Weyburn, when I was working for Johnny before I quit, Esterhazy potash mines

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were going. K1 was in production and K2 was getting ready. It was a rainy day and me and another young fellow went to Esterhazy and checked on getting a job there. We could do that work, but we had to have a medical for that, too. I didn't bother doing that right away, and then I quit working with Johnny. That fall, me and this Kenny McCuaig went to Thompson, Manitoba, and got a job working in a hard rock mine. I worked underground, which I had always wanted to do. The level I worked on at that time was 2200 feet down. They had 2400; it's hard rock and they take the ore out and make tunnels to drive through, for the train to go inside. They were just making tunnels down there; they weren't taking the ore out so I worked in the 2200 level. But I only spent about two weeks there and it got cold and I was a long ways from home. I got thinking about Esterhazy and thought that would be a better deal, so I come back to Esterhazy and got my medical. I only worked at Thompson for about two weeks and come back to Esterhazy and got my medical. They said they'd call me when they had a place for me with the pipefitters when I got there. I got home about the middle of December from Thompson and about the first or second week of January, Esterhazy called me and said I could go to work, so I went there. I worked there for I believe six weeks with pipefitters.

I liked working there, too. When you first start, you do whatever they need you to. You're just a flunkie. They needed somebody to cut the pipes on a 45 bevel on the ends for the welder to weld back together again. I learned how to do that, and the guy that was doing it quit, so then all I did all day was stand and cut the end off of pipes. I learned how to weld there in my spare time. I had a real good boss who said, "If you want to weld, go ahead." One thing they told me when I first started there, it wasn't very long, you know - he told me to go up on the floor up above and get, I am not sure what it was now, but I went up the stairs and got out on the platform and looked around and couldn't find what it was I was supposed to pick up, and went back down. "Oh yeah," he said, "It's out there. You go back up." He said, "Just go walk that beam there and get it". I said, "I don't think I am gonna do that". The beam was only about six inches wide and about 100 feet above the floor below. He said, "If you are scared, you'll probably fall." He come up with me and walked out and picked it up. He said when you are walking a beam, you don't watch your feet, you watch about ten feet in front of you. You watch too close, you'll fall off for sure. So by the time I had my six weeks in, I could walk the beam and it didn't bother me. But I wouldn't want to do it again now!

I actually got laid off at the potash mine on a Friday, and Gilbert Hill, who looked after the irrigation project here (I had asked him for a job previously for that). I got home on a Friday night. He come on Monday and asked if I would come work for him, so I got a job at home here. It was kind of hard to take the paycheque because it was only half of what I made in the mine, but at least I was home with the family. I started working for irrigation in 1967. I stayed with that until 1998, March the 30th, I believe.

All water in Canada that runs through to the US, 50% has to go to the Americans.

MG: I've just been learning about this.

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DK: Merv was the fellow in Havre who looked after irrigation projects in Montana. He and I kept in communication, so he knew what was coming and when, and it made it a lot easier for both of us! The first year I actually started running the project as a manager (maybe I shouldn't talk about this stuff). I was getting some static from the Canadian Water Survey that wanted more water to go to the States because we owed them. I said I can make better use of it by irrigating up here and letting a little of it go and then afterwards pay it back. A fellow with Water Survey in Helena, Montana was a friend of mine at that time. I told him about the problem I was having and he said, "We can't control any more than 25 cubic feet per second. That's all we can put down our inlet to our dam." He said, "The rest gets wasted because it just goes on down into the rivers." So, I finally got him to talk to people in Regina and I finally got my way. It took a while.

DK: I worked for Gilbert Hill until....

MG: '98?

DK: No, he retired in December of '79. I took over as Project Manager after that which was quite a different job, too. I liked what I was doing. I always did like running equipment. As far as going to the office and sitting there doing paperwork, which I quit school so I wouldn't have to do – there was a lot of paperwork involved – I didn't really care for that. I could sit there at a desk all day and work all day, put it in an envelope, take it to town and it was gone. If I was moving dirt, I could see what I did all day.

We used to snowplow. You ever hear of Davis Canal? You know when you are going to Maple Creek and you go up...

NJT: Davis Creek Road.

DK: Davis Creek Road, yes. Well, Davis Creek is probably four miles east of where the sign is. There's a canal up there that is approximately 7½ miles long that takes the water from Davis Creek here, comes around on the prairie, back on the east side of Belanger Creek and then it runs back into Belanger Creek and comes back down again into the Whitemud, Frenchman Valley. When you're going to Maple Creek you go up over a canal going up the hill, and that's the inlet to Cypress Lake. So we divert water from Davis Creek to Belanger Creek and it goes by Sucker Creek and then into Cypress Lake.

NJT: So water from Cypress Lake comes from two directions?

DK: Yeah. It comes from the east and the west.

DK: This is where the water comes from. The Frenchman area that runs into Battle Creek. This is east Cypress Lake here.

DK: [*referring to the Rural Municipality of Reno map*] This is RM of Reno 51. That's what this boundary is. This Davis Canal that we have is actually up in the Maple Creek

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RM, and comes over in a kind of u-shape like that. Then, it runs back into this Belanger Creek here. These three can run into east Cypress, and then on the west Cypress is Battle Creek. It comes down and runs in this area. It's got lots of runoff area, but all of this water.... Battle Creek, half of the water has to go to the Americans. Up here, the Belanger Creek and Davis Creek normally would run down the Frenchman this way, so Eastend Irrigation Project and Val Marie Irrigation Project have to have their water, and then if we can tell before it happens, that there's going to be too much, then we can run it into Cypress Lake. But if there's enough in Cypress Lake, if it was full enough, it runs out here out of an outlet and we can send it down the creek to Val Marie and Eastend. That's quite a lot of messing around. But this canal up here all has to be snowplowed in the spring. That's Little Siberia up there. It just storms and blows and snows. The canal fills in one of the first things that happens.

Yes, we used to start work there on about the first of March, on the average. When I first started working up there, you had a Cat and a bulldozer, or maybe two bulldozers, and then you had another Cat with a snowblower on it. We would blow that canal out and snowplow the outlet that way. When you were finished, we had a trench eight feet wide and however deep - it could be up to ten feet deep. Then the sun would shine in there on these square walls and put a glaze on there - it would freeze it, you know. Water could run through that canal for at least a week before it would ever start to cut that glaze off the walls and start washing the snow. We shared the snowblower with Maple Creek; they had canals, too. Gilbert decided it would be better if we took just Cats and bulldozers, and dozed snow out of the ditch. It wouldn't be as deep, but you'd have a lot more width, and that did work better because you had a bigger surface running. The Cat could pack the snow fairly hard, too, but if the water run through for a few days it would crack and break and start coming up and dissolve it. Just before I retired, PFRA had a big - like a high-hoe, only it was run by cable - and they could reach out into the canal and clean that out and set it on the back side of the bank, so it wasn't bothering. That worked really good, and they are still doing that yet. It's not the same thing as a big high-hoe, and you can reach in there and take the snow out and make a trench about the same as we did with the bulldozers, but you can go right to the bottom, and there's no packing of the snow, so the water starts dissolving it and moving it out right away. The Cats worked ok, but they packed it so hard that it was kind of like a block of ice, and it just wouldn't move out. That's the big problem with that. It's quite costly and time-consuming. One year we snowplowed up there for six weeks. We'd get a piece done, and then it would storm and blow it back in again. You had to keep the snow snow-trapped to keep the snow out. Quite a procedure!

I started out, when I come home, on Davis Creek Canal. My boss at that time was Gilbert Hill. He said originally, before they started snowblowing the canal and doing it that way, he used to get a bunch of people who were not that busy from down here - a bunch of men - to go up there with spades and scoop shovels. The water would start down the canal and they would lead it down. They would make a hole and let it run beneath and it would go underneath for a while, come back up, and they would lead it down. That's how they got the water down the canal for quite a few years. At that time, the water would start running in the hills before it started running down this way and that would work, but it got so it seemed like it was warming up and you had to get the

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snow out quicker to be able to get the water, because if you didn't then you'd miss it. It would all go down east where they quite often didn't need it then.

MG: You had to be really knowledgeable to know how to move it.

DK: Yes. Well a lot of our people in the higher office didn't seem to believe these stories we would tell them. They had their ideas and thought they should be good, that there was nothing wrong with them. Like a lot of that stuff works nice on paper, but it won't work in real life.

DK: The flood of '52 was a thing that people around here probably will never forget. I thought it was great; I didn't have to go to school for quite a while. We were on our own side of the creek and you couldn't get over.

MG: Yeah, flood day!

DK: The flood of '52 was a big flood. When I started work for PF in '67, if I remember right, Gilbert said we put three inches of water in Cypress Lake in three weeks. That was pretty much the spring runoff, and then we got a big snow storm in May. We got 18 inches of wet snow, that killed off calves and made all sorts of problems, but we put about three feet of water in, in quite short order after that. It made a big difference.

MG: How did your parents handle the flood then?

DK: The water come up just about into the corral but not quite. We didn't really have any other problems other than we couldn't go anywhere because it was flooding so bad. I think that was the year we took the team and the wagon, a rubber tired wagon, and we went north and across prairie and through a coulee (that they call Bull Coulee) and we drove out to the edge. Dad got out with a logging chain and he wrapped it around the wagon box and underneath the wagon frame and I wondered why he was doing that. He said, "When we go across this coulee, the box will float off the wagon unless I tie it on because the water is so high."

We did that; we tied it down. We got into town and got our groceries and we made it back home again.

MG: Is this where your family, your father, lived here?

DK: No. There was never a house here until Jo-Ann and I. I was looking for a shop, a building to make a shop out of. Larry Sawden had bought a house-moving outfit from a fellow in Maple Creek. The fellow in Maple Creek had picked this house up. This came from Willow Creek Customs, Canada Customs down there. This was a Canada Customs house.

He and the fellow he was moving it for got into some problem because it was costing more to move than the guy expected. He finally left it in a big coulee down there in the lease, on blocks. When Larry saw it and bought the moving outfit, he wanted the blocks and timbers. I found out he had it; he found out I wanted a building, so we made a deal

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and he hauled it up here. She [*pointing at Jo-Ann*] seen it and said, "I want that for a house." She said, "That's unique. I want it for a house." I lost my shop.

DK: [*referring to map of the RM of Reno*] This is where Consul is, and you come down the road, and over here and down, and this is where Dad lived, where his parents [Joseph Kisell Sr. and Katherine] built a house, three houses actually. That's where we lived, on the edge of that creek, right about where that dot is there. We lived there until '54 and then we moved into a house in town. This house here is what Jo-Ann and I put in here in 1980, I guess it was, or 1981.

DK: That originally was the Rotnem place, and Dad lived here. Rotnems lived right there. I think Dad worked for Rotnem for a year until he got the pasture job. This area down here is PF pasture that he worked on. There was the Battle Creek Pasture, Nashlyn Pasture, and the Govenlock Pasture. Dad had this land here and this piece down here, and then he had another piece of land up here.

MG: So the reason this is all grey is because it's community, shared?

DK: All PFRA pasture. Federal government pasture. It was built kind of in the '30s too, in the early years. The old people always said there was a homestead on every quarter, and of course, the '30s came along and dried them out, and they had to leave. Things weren't good. The government took over this land and made pastures out of it, so they could put cattle in there and have a place for your cattle. Most people, at that time, had a little bit of land, but they didn't have enough to raise enough cattle to make a living off of.

DK: That was a T. Eaton House that they built down there. It came in a package. Actually my grandma bought and paid for that. It was on the cut bank there and it had a veranda in the front, on the bottom floor and one on the top floor right beside the creek. It was a nice place to sleep in the summertime; you could hear the water running over the rocks.

MG: Nice and cool.

DK: I can only remember one time when we were living there that the creek ran dry and didn't run in the summertime. I remember them saying that was pretty well unheard of; it's getting to be heard more often than it ever did that it dries up. We used to have a lot of snow in the wintertime. Last winter was a sample of the '50s. We used to get a lot of snow like that most of the time.