

Transcript of an interview of May and Elmer Ellingsen by Oonagh O'Connor, 1995

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This is April the 4th, 1995, and we're speaking with Elmer Ellingsen and May Ellingsen in their home on Hague Lake on Cortes Island.

So maybe we could begin by talking about when you first met. How did you first meet, Elmer, May?

E. I met May at a dance at Manson's Landing Community Hall in, I think it was August of 1935.

And were you living on the Island at that time?

E. Yes, I was living at Squirrel Cove and May was living out at her uncle's farm, weren't you May?

M. Yes, I was actually visiting over to Cortes Island from Hernando, where my father and Eva lived. And so, I was staying with my relatives here on the Island.

Had you come over for the dance, or were you staying here for a period of time?

M. I think that that dance happened while I was here, staying with my relatives on the island, and that's my recollection.

What had brought you to the island, Elmer?

E. Oh, they, uh, I had been working in Vancouver Harbor on an export boom, peeling fir logs for shipping to Japan, and the firm I was working for had, uh, had been hiring men to peel the bark off these fir logs. And they had a union at the time that was called the Boom Cats Union that was affiliated with the Longshoreman's Union, and in 1935 the Longshoreman's Union went out on strike and shut down everything in the harbor. And we were out in sympathy, you might say, for 11 weeks. And at the end of that time I decided that I was going to leave the city because I could see that some of the fellows that had been working were drifting back to work and I didn't want any part of going back to work until we got the strike settled, so I decided to phone Harry Middleton, who had the machine shop at Squirrel Cove, and I wanted to apprentice in the shop with him, so I phoned him up one evening and he said, come on up, so I did. And he was actually, in a roundabout way, part of the family of May's because his wife Anna was a Manson, and May was a Manson granddaughter at that time. So, I guess Anna would be your second cousin, wouldn't she?

M. I guess so. We always had this little discussion over what was a second cousin, or a cousin once removed. So, we didn't really quite get it decided. But Anna was a full cousin, first cousin of my mother's. That's the relationship.

E. So Anna had said to me you 'd better come to this dance at Mansons because I've got just the girl for you to meet". I've heard that song before, but as soon as I saw May, well I

realized that that was the girl, as far as I was concerned, that I was going to be right after. And so, about a year later, we were married on the 1st of August 1936.

Did you court? Did you have a courtship period?

E. Oh, you might say of a sort. It wasn't too exciting, was it, really, because I had a couple of occasions where I got a chance to take May out for a ride in a car.

M. There weren't many cars around in those days.

E. No, there were about maybe four or five cars on the island.

And this is in the late 30s, mid 30s?

E. In the mid-30s, right. And there was Harry Middleton's car, it was a Ford touring car. And I can remember having to use a five-cell flashlight for, because the headlights on the car weren't working, and I'd use a five-cell flashlight to come over from Squirrel Cove to Mansons to visit with May.

M. One-hand steering.

I think there's still a few cars like that on the Island.

M. It's very possible.

Do you remember that ride, May?

M. Oh, yes,

E. I remember I was quite pleased one day to come over and take some of May's relatives down to vote. And that meant I'd have to go down to the farm where she was staying and pick these relatives up. And I knew it would give me a chance to see May.

So where would people vote?

E. Oh, right at the community center.

So, the community center was already built?

E. Yes, already built.

Is that the Mansons community center?

E. That's the community center now. It's been converted over from... It incorporated the old community hall into the present building.

So, there was already a phone system on the island when you came?

E. There was an old single wire telephone system that was a government telephone at that time when we first came to the Island, and it wasn't very sophisticated, but it worked. You

had to crank the phone, like we've got the old crank phone right on the wall over there and that's the kind of a phone and system it was. There's a magneto right inside the phone and when you twist the, when you turn the crank, it creates this current that will send the signal out so that you can get the bell to ring on the other person's phone. And by having a different series of rings, you could phone different people.

And so that's how you got a hold of Harry Middleton?

E. That's how it... well, no, I got... I phoned him from Vancouver, from North Vancouver, actually, and that was a telephone... at that time that was more sophisticated.

In Vancouver?

E. Yeah, they had telephone operators and switchboards and the whole thing down in the city.

How did you arrive on Cortes?

E. Oh, I came up on the Union Steamship.

And did it take you to Squirrel Cove?

E. It took me to Squirrel Cove and then I just got off at Squirrel Cove and I was boarding with Harry Middleton at the time. So that, well then that fall, May went up to work for my stepmother doing some dressmaking for her, and of course this was right in the logging camp where my father had an operation there of logging, and so May eventually got the job of cooking for the logging camp. And in the early part of 1936, one of the fellows, Morris Black, that had been running the donkey, he quit, and my dad sent the word down for me to come up and run the donkey. And so that's how I got involved in being in the camp at the same time. And then the courtship really got serious because I would go out in the evening and help May wash the dishes and do anything else I could do to put me on the right side of things.

Was he much of a help, May?

E. I think May decided she'd better marry me if she's ever going to get any sleep.

What were the wages you were making at the time, May, cooking in the camp?

M. I think \$60 a month, and of course my board to start with.

How many people were you cooking for?

M. It varied a bit. The crew when they had just the one donkey running, was probably 6 or 7, around that. And then later when they put on a second donkey, they had an additional crew and at that time there'd be 10 or 11.

Were there many other women there?

M. There were 3 families when I first went there and then there was another family came to the camp, so it would be 4 women.

How long did you stay there at the camp?

M. Well, while I was cooking, until 1937, when we moved to Loughborough Inlet, the cookhouse was closed for a while because there were enough families to board the men that were needed at the beginning of the move. After they, when they moved, they would have to set up the camp and get everything ready. After they got started into logging, they opened the cookhouse again, and then there was another cook. By then, Elmer and I were just living in our own home, and we had built the house before we moved from the first camp location. And so we moved into our own home and after that I wasn't cooking anymore for the camp.

Just for Elmer?

M. Yes.

Had that been your first job? Your first paid job?

M. No, well, I cooked for a camp on Hernando Island before that and didn't get much money out of it because we weren't regularly paid and so when it came down to the end of the operation there wasn't a lot of money to share amongst everybody that had wages owing.

Did the \$60 a month seem like a lot of money?

M. It seemed quite reasonable, yes. And afterwards when the crew was larger, I had a raise. I was not only cooking, but I was also sweeping the bunkhouse and making the beds and keeping the wash house clean. So, there was that involved in the job, too.

So, Elmer, you went up there to run the steam donkey?

E. Yes, and I thought I had the world by the tail because I was going to get \$5 a day.

And that was good wages?

E. It was good wages at that time because I had started in originally in the logging, cutting wood for the donkey with a hand saw for \$2.40. And that's 30 cents an hour really. So, at that time of course your board was about a \$1.25 a day and at the end of the month you would probably have \$25 or \$30 dollars left to put in the bank. When we got into running the donkey for \$5 a day, I thought that that was great. And May and I decided that we would put the money aside into an insurance policy that would pay us \$50 a month when the insurance policy was finished. And then we had a government annuity that we were going to pay into and that would give us another \$50 a month. So, we'd have \$100 a month coming in. And we figured those days, we figured by what you could buy with \$100, you know, we'd be living high on the hog. But it hasn't proved out to be correct at all.

M. Times change.

E. You can carry a hundred dollars' worth of groceries out in a basket right now.

Oh, yeah. You'd still be hungry. So, you built your own house, you mentioned, May?

M. We didn't build it. There was a carpenter who had come up to build another bunkhouse for the camp. This was the first location that we were in. And so, we got him to do the building.

And did you have to pay for that?

M. Yes. E. Yes. No, we had to pay that.

Do you remember what the cost of having a house built was?

M. I don't remember exactly now, but

E. I know what we paid for the lumber.

M. We probably still have all the bills down in the box some place in the basement.

E. We paid \$17 a thousand for really nice cedar shiplap lumber and we paid \$50 a thousand for the cedar siding that was absolutely flawless, it had no knots anywhere and it was sanded, and it was 10-inch-wide boards all ready to put the paint on and that was \$50. That was bought from the Sterling Lumber Company in Vancouver, and we had all the materials for the house brought up on a scow and this was a 30 ft. by 90 ft. scow, and we paid \$10 a day for the demurrage, you call it, for renting the scow. The tugboat that was towing the logs from my dad brought the scow up at the same time as he was going to take a boom of logs away. So it didn't cost us anything for towing it up and didn't cost anything for towing it back. And we only had to pay \$10 a day for the use of the scow. So that was a real big saving in cost. And we bought all the hardware for the home, like plumbing and that, we bought that from Marshall Wells at that time, who were wholesale hardware people in Vancouver. And so we got that because my dad had an account with them, but we were able to get that at a wholesale price.

And did you move this house around with you as you moved from camp to camp?

E. We've lived in that house now since 1937, and we're still in it.

Oh, this is it?

E. This is it.

Oh, wow.

E. This is the house.

Wow.

E. Yeah. And it's roughly 26 ft. by 45 ft. That's the dimensions of the house. And now we have a full basement.

M. And we made a few changes when we put it on the basement. We cut the archway out and we took what had been the porch –into a porch and a utility room, and we took into the house as the back entrance.

So, tell me about your marriage. Were you married on Cortes?

M. No, we were married in Powell River.

Did you have a big celebration?

M. We had, I guess you'd say, a reception in the hall at Mansons Landing when we came back to the island again. But we came down from the camp where we were living at the mouth of Fredericks Arm and Elmer's father brought us down. He stayed at Squirrel Cove waiting for his mother, Elmer's grandmother, to come up on the Union Steamship boat because she was going to join us there and then we were all going to go to Powell River. My father and Eva lived here at that time on Gunflint Lake, so we came over there to their place to stay the night and the next morning Flo McCay was going to take us over. That's my mother's, one of my mother's sisters, was going to take us back to Squirrel Cove. That would be my dad and Eva and Elmer and I to go down to Powell River in the gas boat with Elmer's father and his grandmother. To begin with the car didn't want to go up the hill, and we had to get out and push it up, you know, just to get it started and really going up the hill. So, it was kind of another car adventure at that time.

E. We met my dad down at Seaford and got on the boat there and went to Powell River. And we went to the home of the minister where we were getting married. We were married, instead of being married in the church, we were married in the minister's home. And May's brother was along, that's Wilfred.

M. He was in Powell River.

And then did you all come back to Cortes?

E. Yes.

M. Well, Wilf didn't.

E. No, Wilf didn't come back, but May and I came back, and then my dad and then Eva.

M. But your dad went on home.

E. Yeah.

M. And we went for a week, a week's honeymoon down to Elmer's cousin's place in Washington.

How did you get there?

M. We caught the Union Steamship boat at Mansons Landing and then went through to Vancouver, of course, on that, and then went on the bus down to

E. Stanwood

M. Where the cousin lived and we had a really good time there.

E. They had a resort at Utsalady Beach on Camano Island, and they pulled a real good trick on us that evening. They told us they had a new rule in the court there that everybody had to be in bed by 10 o'clock. And we thought that would be great. So, we just nicely got settled into bed and the first thing we knew they "chivered" us. There were shotguns going off and big wash basins and stuff they were banging on. And they said, we're coming right in, so we didn't have any choice over the matter. But it was a good experience.

M. It was all fun. And there was a little organ in that cabin, wasn't there? So, Elmer was playing music, and we were singing songs and all that kind of thing.

How did you learn how to play music?

E. I took piano lessons when I was at public school, and then further into – I took from an English lady, Frances Flett, who was in the Badminton apartments in Vancouver on Dunsmuir and Howe Street, the corner. And I took quite a few years of classical piano from her. And just before I left the city, I had been taking some piano lessons from a popular piano teacher, Ted Williams by name. And so, by the time I got away from the city, I had a, you might say, a fair grounding in music.

I've seen many photographs of you with an accordion in your hand.

E. Well, yes, I didn't take up the accordion playing until I got to the Island because pianos weren't that numerous around the area, and being as an accordion was a portable instrument, I decided to go in for an accordion, and I borrowed \$200 from May to buy my first accordion, and I went to the BC Collateral Loan in Vancouver and bought one of the used accordions, you might say. And so May said that that's the poorest investment she ever made, because the thing being that she would sit at the dances while I was playing and of course that didn't give her the opportunity to dance very much.

M. Besides, I never got my money back.

E. I don't think I'll ever be able to pay her anyway for all the good turns that I've had.

M. And all the haircuts.

E. That's right. So, we've had a very enjoyable "going on" 59 years.

That's amazing.

E. Yeah, we've been very lucky people.

So, you started having children soon, I guess.

M. Our daughter was born in 1939, when we were in Loughborough Inlet.

What was her name?

Shirley.

And where did you have her?

M. I went to Vancouver, and I stayed with my father's sister, my aunt, in Vancouver. And then Elmer came down, you came down when we brought her home.

And did you come home on the steamship together?

M. Oh yes.

How old was she when you brought her up to the camp?

M. She was going to be about five weeks old, I think. I was going to say six, maybe six, between five and six weeks old, because we stayed in town for a little while.

Do you remember that, Elmer? Do you remember going down and...

E. Oh, yes. I remember the first word I got before the baby arrived was that she was possibly going to have twins.

M. My mother was a twin, so it didn't seem out of the realm of possibility that I would have twins, but it was just because the doctor had taken an X-ray and he thought it looked like as if it might be twins, but then afterwards he said it would be because the baby had moved when they were taking the picture and that would be why that gave him that impression.

E. This was out of DeMuth, by the way, the doctor.

M. I was glad she wasn't twins because I think when you have your first baby, you're kind of learning to look after them and if it was double it would be more of a task.

Did you feel isolated when you were raising your... when you were with your first child in the logging camp?

M. I don't recall ever thinking about it in that way. You know, it was a way of life, and we just accepted it. And I had not come out of town to live in the logging camp. I had lived out on the coast, you know, beforehand. So that way of life was, you might say, more familiar to me. I think we took it in our stride.

Were you around any other mothers?

M. Yes. There was one little boy in the camp at Loughborough. And he used to come and visit me all the time. And he would... he was about four years old, I guess, and he was kind of lonely because he was the only little boy in camp, only child in camp. So, he would come and visit, and he would bring his book and ask me if I'd read him a story, which I did, and then we'd sometimes... we would just talk. Or if I was doing something... one day I was ironing when he came over and he said, May, could I pump the iron for you? And that was, I was using a Coleman gas iron, and you had to use a little pump to pump the air and keep the pressure in the tank. And so of course he had seen me doing that and he thought that he ought to be able to do that kind of a job. It looked kind of interesting to him. But he was a cute little fellow.

E. I believe he's living in Campbell River right now.

M. But he, when the men were booming on the logs out just in front of our houses... we were all just up on the beach... and the men were out on the boom, and he was bound and determined he was going to go out there where the men were. His mother tried and tried to keep him from going out on this boom stick. It was just one log wide, you know, you had to walk, and it wasn't very stable. And, but he had never fallen in himself, but she went to the extreme of going out the log and putting him into the water to make him realize what would happen if he fell in. And it still didn't stop him. And so, she tied him up. Our house was rather high off the beach at the front, and it was supported by a big log, so she tied him up with a rope so that he couldn't get any further, you know, couldn't get down to the edge of the water even. And he would sit under our house and say, "Agnes, Agnes, I'll be good. Please let me off, Agnes."

Oh, no.

M. And so, you know, she would leave him there for a while, just hoping that it would stop him from going out and having a mistake.

Did you have challenges raising children around, in that kind of environment, safety challenges? Were you ever fearful for your children's life?

M. Pardon?

Were you ever fearful for your children's life in that kind of environment, you know, falling in the water, falling out of the float house, or between logs?

M. Well, we were in Phillips Arm by the time, shortly after Shirley was born. She was only six months old, I think, when we moved down to the river, the Phillips River, and that was a rather difficult place to keep track of where the children were after they got old enough, you know, so that they would be outside playing. You had to be watching them all the time, because there was... we didn't have any fences or any way of making sure that they were not getting into some kind of a dangerous situation. And eventually, Andy, our third child, was born when we were in Phillips Arm. And he nearly drowned in a pool because he had followed his dad over to the office when they brought the mail up from Shoal Bay, which is

where they picked it up. Or at times the steamer came in to the head of Phillips. But anyway, they brought the mail up the river to the camp, and they would sort it at the office and then everyone would get their mail. And Andy had followed Elmer over to the office, and I think Elmer maybe wasn't all that aware that he had followed him up. And right in front of the office there was quite a big pool because we'd been having... there was a little depression that filled because we'd been having quite a bit of rain and Andy stayed outside- he didn't go into the office. He stayed outside and he was playing, I guess, in the pool, probably. That's what it looked like from my window, anyhow. And then, after a bit, when I looked, you know, I was watching him all the time. I did something and looked up again and he wasn't on this little walk that he had been on before. So, I ran over and he was in the pool.

E. And he was face down?

M. Face down in the pool.

E. The water was just deep enough so that when he put his hands down to raise himself up, his face wouldn't get out of the water. And he was completely black and blue, you might say, and even his ears were blue. And I put him across my thigh and pressed on him and applied, you might say, artificial respiration to the best degree that I knew at that time. I'd push on his back and then release it and then push it again and release it. And, by golly, you know, he blew a little bit of mucus out of his nose, nostrils, and started breathing again. And what a relief that was. That's as close as you can come to drowning, you know. We didn't know anything about mouth-to-mouth at that time.

How were medical emergencies dealt with in the camp?

M. Well there was always a gas boat in camp and so they, you would just take them out to the hospital.

E. At Rock Bay?

M. Yeah, Rock Bay was the closest hospital.

How far was that?

E. Oh, about 25 miles. But you took care of any, you know, just ordinary things with first aid treatment.

M. Yes, there would be a first aid man in camp.

So how many children did you have?

E. Three. Two sons and a daughter.

M. Andy, our youngest, was born in Rock Bay. And I think there were two other ladies there. One lady was from Sayward and then Nancy Snarr, but she wasn't Snarr, she was married to Fair, Lloyd Fair, wasn't she? And when Andy worked over in Teakerne Arm, she had a son.

And when Andy worked over in Teakerne Arm after he had been to university and he came up and worked at Teakerne Arm in the summertime, he met this fellow. The two of them had been born in Rock Bay at the same time. He was born just after Andy.

Did you have someone looking after your other children while you were in hospital?

M. Yes, Elmer's aunt looked after them. She was housekeeping for his father at the time.

How would you feel, Elmer, when May was going to hospital to give birth? Would you be worried or excited?

E. I wasn't too worried, no, and I was just, you might say, quite pleased with the prospect of having another child in the family. And we didn't... After three, we decided that we wouldn't, being as we'd had two boys, we decided that instead of having maybe three boys and a daughter, we'd just chop it off there and not have any more children.

So how did you eventually come to Cortez? When was that? .

E. 1946 was when we moved down from Phillips Arm. And I came down to Von Donop to go in partnership with a cousin of May's, Mike Herrewig, and Bob McKenzie was the partner that he had at the time. We formed the EM&H. It was a firm name that we operated under at the time, a partnership. And we had just a small logging operation with a gas donkey, a logging truck, and some booming equipment. And I had brought down this old gas 60 tractor that Alan Olmsted had just prior to him passing on, and it's still in Whaletown. And I had brought this down with us on the float from Phillips Arm. And so we built a road from Von Donop, which is presently used to go from where Richard Lawton has his property now out to Squirrel Cove, and we built that with this gas 60 cat, a tractor. And so we were there until 1949, I believe. And then we moved from Von Donop down to Mansons Landing, with the house, and we had it in at the Lagoon. And then in 1952 we moved it up to the lake site. Is that correct, May?

M. Yeah, I think it was 50 when we came into the Lagoon.

E. It wasn't 49.

M. No.

E. Okay. 1950. And they started, the kids started school down here.

Is that why you moved down to this part of the island?

E. Not necessarily. But I think...

M. .. it had quite a bit to do with it. It had quite a bit to do with it because they were getting, the children were getting into the higher grades. But we had started a school in Von Donop because there were enough children there, where we ended up. When Jack and Jean McKenzie moved in, we ended up with a dozen children between us all and the Layton

boys also came into the picture to make the required 10 that you need to open a school. So, we started to begin with by having Mrs. Ballantyne, who used to live near Robertson Road. She came and taught the children for probably five months. And then Violet Herrewig took over teaching. And to begin with, in the earlier, in those first days, we didn't have enough to open a school, but we did eventually have enough to open a school, and have a school, a little school building. But when Mrs. Ballantyne first came, there was a log building that had been built by the man that owned the property. I don't know how early it was, but it was quite a few years earlier that he had lived there. And so that's where Mrs. Ballantyne stayed and taught the children in that building. It was quite, you know, quite, it must have been, must have left quite a bit to be desired, you might say, in the way of lighting and all. When we got the little building for the school, it was much better.

Had you been teaching your children at home before that?

M. My sister-in-law was a teacher and in the last year that we were at Phillips Arm she took Shirley through grade one and into two. That was the... I never did any real teaching. You know, some parents used the correspondence school courses. And I think they had a very good reputation for being quite good., and that was, I think, the basis of the teaching that Shirley had, was on the correspondence courses,

When you were living in Von Donop, did you go to the other communities on the island? You mentioned that you built a road to Squirrel Cove.

E. Only on occasion. We'd come over and go to a show, maybe once a week?

Whereabouts?

M. When we first lived there we went to Whaletown for our mail and when we first came down before we got Mrs. Ballantyne to come to teach the children, we had hoped that maybe we might be able to transport them out to Whaletown to go to the school there and they did go to the school to start with but it was soon obvious that you wouldn't be able to do that through the winter bad weather months and so that was when we got Mrs. Ballantyne to come and stay and teach, and the building the road to Squirrel Cove came in at a later date, didn't it?

E. Yeah.

What was the purpose of that?

E. Oh, to give you a closer... it was closer to Squirrel Cove than it was to Whaletown.

How would you...?

E. To build that road. Oh yeah. It was a big plus in our books.

How would you get back and forth between the communities?

E. Well, by car, we'd have a Model A Ford car that we owned at the time.

M. That was how, when I learned to drive in the Model A, and you know, they have, instead of having a pedal for the gas, there was just a little button, about so big, that was on the pedal, that controlled the gas. So, when I started in to drive, the road of course was very rough and bad. So, to begin with, the progress would be kind of jerky and the kids were just about killing themselves in the back seat of the car.

E. Laughing.

You were learning to drive with the kids in the back seat.

M. Yes.

And were you teaching yourself?

M. No, Elmer was in the passenger seat saying, no, no, don't do that! We had a lot of fun and then after that when Elmer was driving sometimes he would.. E. deliberately.. M. make the car jerk just for fun.

E. By pushing your foot down on the throttle and then lifting it off and the car would jerk, and the kids thought that was great. Wanted me to do it some more.

Was there anyone who inspected your driving skills?

M. No. No.

E. No.

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