

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

So, I was just asking if there was anyone who tested your license, your driving skills. Did you need a license or anything like that when you were driving on the island? May or Elmer?

M. No, there was an arrangement at that time, where someone that was a recognized individual in the community would sign a statement that you were competent to drive the car, and then you would be issued a license that the police would honor, it wasn't for driving off of the island, but just for driving on the island, that it was allowed.

Would the police come over?

M. The police would come on occasion, yes.

By boat, I guess.

M. They came by boat, yes. And they probably would come for some other reasons, but very often they would check cars, car licenses and that kind of thing. Or they might come for some other reason to the island. And it wasn't very often that I ever heard of anybody asking about a license, and a policeman I mean, asking for your license. But if there had been any problems of car accidents, they might, but I had never heard of it.

I guess there wasn't much traffic on the island in those days.

E. No. M. No, not very much traffic. It was not that often that you met another car. And sometimes you'd have to back up to come to a place where you would be able to pass by getting off of the road. And it wasn't everywhere on the road that there was that possibility.

So, the roads were one lane?

M. Yes. There was still grass growing in the middle.

E... and ferns on the side.

M. And ferns on the side, and in the fall when the ferns had got their full growth and in lots of places they would get quite tall, and then the fall rains start and the ferns would all be bending in towards the road, you know, and when you were driving through, you'd be brushing ferns as you drove, not everywhere, but in some places.

While we were trying to take over, you thought of a story you were about to tell.

M. Oh, it just made me think of this one occasion when one fellow that used to drive his car met up with another person coming in the opposite direction of course and he informed the other driver that he would have to back up and let him pass because he, the first man, had a license to drive.

0:03:30

E. I had a driver's license from the time I was 17 in North Vancouver, you see, so I was okay. But in those days, you didn't have to, you know, have to get a re-examination for your

driver's license. Once you had your driver's license, you were set. The only thing I question about it right today is that at that time I got my driver's license, I was driving a motorcycle and that was, that was considered, if you had a driver's license, you could drive a motorcycle or an automobile, but I don't think that today that applies. I think you have to have your motorcycle driving tested.

Did you have a test?

E, Oh, yes, I had a test when I first... and it was satisfactory, you might say, so that I got my driver's license. And then I never did forget my driver's license number, because it's quite a low one. It's 0179291. And that shows you how many driver's licenses had been issued up to that time. Like 179,291. and you know they're probably up in the, I was going to say hundreds of thousands today.

M. I'm sure they would be at least hundreds of thousands. E. Yeah.

Where did the roads go on the island? Did they go from Squirrel Cove to Mansons?

M. By the 50s... that was one of the advantages that we had by building the road through from Von Donop Creek, to Squirrel Cove was that it allowed us to drive then out to Mansons Landing. But to begin with, in the earlier days there weren't roads between the different centers, the centers being Mansons Landing and Squirrel Cove and Whaletown. And there was no connecting road between Mansons Landing and Squirrel Cove until 1931. And there was no connecting road between Whaletown and Squirrel Cove until the early 40's, I'm not exactly sure which year that was, and when that road was opened up from Squirrel to Whaletown, that allowed Mansons Landing traffic to go by way of Squirrel Cove and get to Whaletown on the road, but, you know, in those earlier days it was all water traffic, you know, you had to go by water to do more than walk. There would be trails that you could go.

E. You know, when we first moved down in 1946, there was no connection through from Squirrel Cove to Whaletown.

M. No. So, I said the early 40s, and I was probably wrong about that. It was probably the latter half of the 40s when it was put through.

E. because Nehemiah... Elmer, it wasn't through, yes, that's right, but that was '36. When we were married it definitely wasn't through.

E. No.

M. Because, you know, they went up to Kendrick's on the trail. Yeah.

E. That was the end of the road. Where Wendy Legare lives today was the end of the road from Whaletown coming towards Squirrel Cove. And then this logging operator in the mid-forties, Buster Nehemiah, he put in a logging road up towards Stitch's and then the SE&S Logging [Note: Carl Saeterhaug, Aaron Emanuelson and Ivan Sandvik doing business as SE&S Logging] completed that road through to where Stitches are now. And then...

M. I think Gordon Dewar pushed it through to join up with the Whaletown.

E Gordon Dewar, yeah, that's Ann Dewar's father-in-law. He did the cat work to bring the road through from Wendy Legare's to join up at the bottom of the hill at the Gorge right by Ben Fulton's now. He put that piece of road in so that then you could drive right on through.

0:08:25

And that would have been what year? In the 50's, maybe?

E. No, it wasn't in the 50's. It was before, prior to the 50's. It would probably be, maybe, 48.

So, you had moved from Von Donop by this point, and is that true, and you were living in Mansons Lagoon?

E. No, not quite. No. See, there was no connection through to Whaletown that way from Von Donop when Gordon Dewar put that piece of road in.

So, for what occasions would you leave Von Donop?

E. Just to go and visit May's dad. That would be the main purpose we'd have.

M. He lived out where Bruce is now, which is out at the, out at Sutil Point.

So, he'll land there, out at Sutil Point, and he also will land by Gunflint Lake?

M. My father was just living in a little building that was on Gunflint Lake. And that was, that would be before he bought the property out at the Sutil Point.

And would you come out for films and for, you were saying earlier, I think you came out for shows?

E. Yeah, to see the picture shows, but we didn't come to get any films for ourselves.

Would you come up for dances?

E. Oh yes.

M. Elmer would probably play for the dances.

Would you bring the whole family?

M. Oh yeah.

E. And the kids would be going to sleep underneath the platform where you'd be up above playing and it didn't seem to worry them at all. They'd be sleeping great, wouldn't they?

Would this be at Whaletown Hall, or would this be at Mansons Hall?

E. Any of the halls.

0:10:37

So you'd go to the dances in both communities?

M. Yes.

0:10:40

And how about picnics? Are picnics a big event?

M. Yes.

Do you remember coming up for any picnics?

M. Oh yes, but the only ones that I remember would be down at Smelt Bay. And I don't know of any picnics at Whaletown that we had. I don't know that there were any that were held while we were in Von Donop except, you know, individual people would maybe organize a picnic with a group of their friends and get together, but not on the community basis. But the picnics at Smelt Bay that I was just referring to would be community-arranged picnics and just everybody came out. But it was not the kind of thing where they'd be selling hot dogs and that sort of thing, like we have at Cortes Days now. It would be the kind of picnics where everybody brought food and then set it out and everybody had some. Yeah, but you know, it was like potluck type of thing more. And they'd have races for the kids and different little things like that just for fun, but it was usually quite a...

E. It seemed to me you'd have a ball game too.

M. Probably have a ball game.

E. A softball game.

How often would they happen?

M. It was probably not more than twice in a year, and maybe only once, you know, like 1st of July. You might think that you'd have one for the 24th of May. 24th of May and 1st of July were the two occasions when it seemed like picnics would be organized. And sometimes the 24th of May would be rained out. And 1st of July was more likely to be dependable weather.

So, you mentioned earlier about leaving Von Donop-- that you left. One concern was getting the kids to school. And why else did you leave Von Donop? Were you running out of work there, Elmer?

E. Oh, I was - no, I had formed this partnership with Stan Anderson and we moved down here partially because we were going to be logging down here with the tractor. We started out logging at May's dad's property where Bruce is presently, and then we logged on the property adjoining the Paukeanum Indian Reserve and we hauled our logs down onto the beach at the reserve and put them in the water all at once, like just piled them up on the beach and then pushed them all in and towed them around into Mansons Lagoon to boom them up. But it was partly, you know, to come down here and be living closer to where we were going to be logging, because I had sold out... at the time we moved down to Mansons, I

had sold out my partnership with Scotty and Mike, so that we weren't involved in logging anymore in that area.

0:14:38

M. Well, the timber was running out too, wasn't it? Because it wasn't too long before the rest of the camp closed down and they moved out. Like McKenzies came down to the Mansons Lagoon and Herrewigs came out. And Scotty and Amy came to Whaletown. So, it was partially because the timber, you know, was running out in that area and probably partly that you made the partnership with Stan.

E. Well, I could see that coming you know.

M. Yes. And that was coupled with the fact that our youngsters were getting into higher grades and to come down here would mean that they could go through grade 10. And in actual fact, our daughter did grade 12 here. The teacher, that was here when she had reached that stage of having to start grade 11, was qualified to take her through to grade 12 and complete her high school courses here. So that wasn't always the case. The next teacher wasn't qualified to do that.

E. You might as well say how well Shirley did in graduating from the school here.

M. Yes, she did. She did very well. And she probably would have had a scholarship. Her teacher felt that she would have had a scholarship if he had known early enough that she could apply for it. But for some reason he wasn't aware that she could apply for this until after the closure, you know. So, she could have had a, most likely could have had help.

E. Her marks would have warranted her getting a \$2,000 Crown Zellerbach scholarship.

Did she go on at school?

E. Yes, she went on to university for two years and then took teaching. And she taught for about ten years in Powell River. And then when her children got old enough, she decided to...

M. Well, it was when Corrie was born.

E. Yeah

M. She decided that she would stay home to be with the children until they were school age at least. And it strung out to be longer than that, as it turned out. She had taught for ten years before Corrie was born.

E. Both of the boys graduated from university.

0:17:49

So you sound happy with the education that you received here on the island?

M. Oh, yes. I always felt that the children that went on to go to school in other places, that I know of anyway, some to Vancouver, some to Campbell River maybe, etc. It always seemed to me that they did really well, and I wondered if it might not have something to do with going from, you know, a one or two room school. When you're in that situation, you do have to study and do things on your own because the teacher has got more, well in a one room school probably has eight grades to look after even though it's only a few pupils in each maybe. But the work has to be organized so that the child carries on for themselves. And they have more ability built in, in that regard.

More independence?

M. Yes, less dependence on having a teacher tell them every move. I just wonder if that might have something to do with it because so many of them seem to really do quite well even though they had come from a smaller school.

Well, just to take a few steps backwards here, how did you end up moving to this spot?

M. Up onto Hague Lake?

Yeah.

M. Well, we lived in... we had our house on the beach in Mansons Lagoon and I think what started it was that we were debating about possibly moving to Vancouver Island, and this was for schooling too, thinking about schooling. This man that was in logging down around Stillwater, Powell River area,

E. Ian Mahood,

M. came to visit us and he was interested in buying our house. And that sort of made us think, well, maybe we should sell our house and think about moving to a place where the children could go to a school that would take them right through grade 12. And at the same time, Mahood was also interested in the thoughts of property on the island as well. And so, Elmer, he was just in for a short visit, and so Elmer knew about the property not right where our house is now, but the one next, the quarter section next to the one that this property is in, knew that there was a man living there that was quite anxious to sell. And so, he offered to go up and talk to him and find out exactly what he wanted for the pro

perty and be able to report to Mahood about this. And so, in the end, so Elmer, we did this. We went up and visited with the man and Elmer found out the details that he needed and then it turned out that Mahood had changed his mind and wasn't going to do anything about getting property here or buying our house either. He was, had changed his direction. So, after coming up on the lake and seeing the property, Elmer thought that he'd like to buy it, so he bought it. And right after that, the people that were living in the house where Finnertys are, that's over on, just, you could see it from here, but it's, it was a house that was built by my uncle Fraser Campbell. And then he had sold to people by the name of Norris. And Mr. Norris had had a heart attack and was not all that well. And they were anxious to move. And that's how we got this piece of property, because the two were side by side.

E. And we bought both of them.

M. We bought both.

And what year would this have been?

0:23:18

E. Well, when we bought that other property, it was 1952, wasn't it?

M. Very early, and because it was '52, it was at Christmas time. We spent Christmas in Mansons Lagoon, and then right afterwards moved the house, and brought it up here. And we, the children and I, lived in this, in the house that I'm talking about

That was built by your uncle?

M. That was built by my uncle...

E. Part of it is still there.

M. for a month, until we actually got the house into position so that we could move in over here. And then we rented to the teacher that was here at that time, and fortunately this teacher stayed long enough to take Shirley through her grade 12. But he left that year so that Bruce and Andy, who were younger, had to... Bruce took his grade 12 in Campbell River and then he was going to go on to university. So, I went to Vancouver with the children because they were all going. Shirley was there in university and Bruce was going into university and so Andy took his grade 12 at Kitsilano High in Vancouver. So, that took care of their schooling. After that, for that one year, they took a suite, the three of them together. And I guess it was the hardest on Shirley because I'm sure she had most of the cooking to do and all, but anyway, they managed and that was how they got the rest of their schooling.

How did it feel to you when your children left?

M. Mixed, mixed. We missed having them here. Of course, it sort of went, we sort of separated by degrees, I guess you'd say, but we were pleased to see them, you know, going on to take the schooling and then get on with their lives. But we've always been close enough. They always came home for holidays. We've been close enough, fortunately been close enough, that we've kept in pretty close touch.

And by now I imagine you are grandparents?

M. Oh yes, yes.

Are you great-grandparents?

E. No,

M. We're not.

E. Eight grandchildren.

M. Yes.

And do any of your children live on the island right now?

M. Yes, Bruce, and his family live on the island. Of course, he doesn't have all of his family at home now, or I mean on the island. Tor is on the island but not living at home. And Trygve is living out on the property, but he's got a little house, or he's building a little house of his own.

E. And the other grandson is, Aaron, that's Andy's boy, he's living out on Manzanita Road.

M. Yes, I think they'll soon be moving.

E. Just before you get to the castle there.

M. Tor and Sean Sprungman were house-sitting for a couple that have this house out there on Manzanita, and they go south. I think that they were going to Costa Rica this year.

So, when you said that was Andy's boy?

E. Aaron,

Oh, Aaron.

E. Have you met him? – he plays the violin.

Oh, yes, how is he related? How is Aaron related?

M. He's our youngest son's, Andy's son.

I see. He's Andy's son.

E. That's right.

He's a wonderful musician too.

E. Yes, he is.

You must have influenced that.

E. I don't think I've had too much to do with it, because I didn't have any of the earlier, you might say, instruction or anything, but he's done very well.

M. Well, they were on the island for a while, when Aaron was quite young, but then they moved back to Vancouver and, or Burnaby at least, and so he was able to take violin lessons. And violin was his choice, and we were so pleased that... we didn't have any input into that... but we were so pleased when we heard that he had chosen the violin and was really wanting to have lessons and did carry through with it because Elmer's father made violins and he played violin until, you know, the heavy work in the logging made his fingers too thick to just stop one string. When he found that he couldn't do that anymore... he'd keep

on, and the finger would be interfering with the next string, you know. When he couldn't stop just one string, he put the violin away. I never heard him play. Because he didn't touch it anymore, did he?

E. I never heard him play either. Not to my knowledge.

M. But he made violins from scratch.

E. He made five violins that I know of.

M. And probably lots of...

E. There's one still that we know of that... I gave it to Mary Mumford because she used to play in the Little Symphony in Vancouver and she was one of the neighbours here and she's moved to Victoria now, but Mary has this instrument and I'm a little bit hesitant to ask her for it back again, but I didn't actually give it to her, as an outright gift, but I gave it to her for her use. And I'd like to have it for Aaron to, for his sake, but I did give him a violin that I had that had been in my father's home when we took the contents out of my father's home after he died. And this is the house, by the way, that Ian and Joan Disney live in at present, that was my father's home up in Phillips Arm, and this violin was in the amongst the contents there and my half-brother Dan, you might say, had been living in or had the possession of that home after my father's death and when we cleaned it out the question came up about this violin that was there, and Dan said that he wasn't interested in the violin, but one of his daughters, by marriage, had the — that was — I shouldn't say that either. It's not by marriage. It's by —

M. Stepdaughter.

E. Stepdaughter. They preferred to have the guitar that was in the house. And so, I said, well, fine, you take the guitar for the girls, and I'll take the violin. Well, now this violin is the one that currently Aaron is using. And it was purchased in 1912 by my father in Vancouver. And initially it had some inscriptions in it that would indicate that it had been built in Italy, in Cremona, by Guarneri, Petrus Guarneri, it says right on the inscription on the inside of the back, but we don't really know that it's that genuine, but it would be a real collector's item if it were. But anyway, Aaron, he really enjoys playing it, so...

M. He likes the sound of it, too. Well, a friend, actually Debbie Fontaine's father, knew a man in town that had studied, researched or studied the Guarneri violin and was at least to some extent recognized as an authority on them. And when he looked at this, Debbie's father took this violin to Vancouver and gave it to this fellow to appraise, you might say. And when he looked at it, he said, of all the violins that he had looked at, he thought that this one was probably the most likely to be authentic, you know. And he said at least it's been well used and enough so that on the edge of the violin, the finish of the violin, like on that one side, was scratched by the whiskers of whoever had been using it.

E. Worn by the whiskers.

M. Yes.

E. Because they didn't have a chin rest on the violins, initially on the violin playing. I didn't realize that either, but when he made this statement that originally they played the violin and if they had whiskers, the whiskers would be bearing right down on the violin.

0:34:36

M. Like sandpaper. But we thought that was kind of interesting.

Well, I'd like to ask you one last question, perhaps, which is maybe to reflect a bit on life on Cortes today and how do you feel about life on Cortes?

M. Well we still enjoy it, but it's changing, of course, and, and I'm sure that that's to be expected. It isn't something that you would, you know, reasonably expect not to happen. I think that with the coming of the ferry and Hydro, all these things have made it more attractive to more people, and of course also its' qualities of scenery and...

E. climate.

M. And climate, yes. That's all attractive.

E. And the fact that we have this really lovely beach on this lake here, you know, makes it attractive for people in the summertime. And the yachting people take advantage of that. They walk up from that, tie up their boats at Mansons and walk up to the beach and go ahead and swim in the beach and walk back down to their boats.

M. Well, so many of the islands, I think, are attractive. I think people like islands.

E. Well, there's a certain amount of isolation that you can enjoy here that you don't get in the city. And it seems to separate you from the ills of the city if you want to put it that way. It's an advantage. Because when you hear of the different things that are going on in the city, you're kind of glad to be away from it.

So, would you ever consider living somewhere else?

M. We haven't.

E. Not unless somebody was able to tell me and give me a real, you know, a definite outline of someplace that's better, because I don't know that... I wouldn't... I've never heard of any place that's better than Cortes Island for a place to live.

M. No, not from our standpoint. I think probably it doesn't allow all the possibilities for young people to make a living. That's limited. And so, for younger people, there's probably the necessity for living somewhere else. That would depend, of course, on what their calling happens to be.

Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we stop the tape?

0:38:11

E. No, the only thing I would just mention is that we have a very good garden and we feel that growing your own vegetables, and we have the advantage of having had an orchard of our own over the years, and I think that the fact that you're growing your own vegetables and you get a lot of your own fruit and we press our own apple juice, I think those are all health, added health advantages, that we have that has given us, you might say, good health in our senior years. And I think they're very important for anybody else to consider.

M. Well, that kind of thing keeps you active physically, too, which is probably a good thing. And I think also we're quite free of certain pressures that maybe put stress on people. So, we're very lucky to be in that position.

E. I was in the fortunate situation too after I got finished logging, I got this opportunity from this very lady that I mentioned about the violin. Her husband had the property that is now the gravel pit that Robbie Graham has, and I was able to get that piece of property from her and operated a backhoe and gravel business for a number of years.

Oh really?

E. So, I was able to, you might say, be very close to the community in that business that I was in, because I was all over the island and met, you might say, at least 70% of the people. And I enjoyed the association that I had and, that gave me a good chance to appreciate the type of people that you're in meeting with, in business like, and it gives you an overall assessment of the people that come to Cortes Island are a special type of people. And it really makes you feel good to have been fortunate enough to have, you might say, rubbed elbows with all these different good types.

It seems like the two of you have been very fortunate.

M. Yes

E. Absolutely.

To still be in love after so many years.

E. Yes.

So, well, you initially said you came to the island to apprentice with Middleton, with Harry Middleton. Do you regret not doing that?

E. Oh, I think that's the... I've even said to May that if I had to do it over again, I would choose the same partner. And it was through coming to Harry Middleton's, of course, that I met May. I wouldn't hesitate to say that.

M. You probably learned things that were quite valuable to you in, you know, dealing with the motors and the steam engines and...

E. Certainly.

M... and etc. that you had to deal with through the years too.

Well, I guess we'll end it at that. Thank you.

0:41:56

E. Oh, you're welcome.

Disclaimer: This text is transcribed from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate, in some places it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the oral history, but should not be treated as an authoritative record.