

Interview of Mary McMillan by Oonagh O'Connor, 1995

0:00:00

And I'm 82 now, so if you take 14 from 82, you've got approximately how long. *[Note: she would have moved to Cortes in 1927]*

0:00:16

I'm speaking with Mary McMillan in her home in Campbell River, and it's the 11th of April 1995, and I'm Oonagh O'Connor.

0:00:26

Mary, when, so your parents went there when you were 14 years old? Well, they were there for about six months before I was. I stayed with a sister of mine in Beaverdale, Alberta, BC, a mining town. My sister was there, he was, her husband was living there and she wanted someone to stay with her for a while so I stayed with her for about six months and then I joined my parents.

And where did they have land? Eh, well they called it Cougar Hill in those days. I don't know what they call it now. Can you try to describe where that is? It's where the road turns, the Carrington Bay Road turns off from the main road. You stay on the main road and it's just up that first hill. Uh-huh. Right on the top of that first hill.

So was it around Carrington Bay then?

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No, no, no. *It's just along the road.*

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We turned off the Carrington Bay Road. At where the Carrington Bay Road turns off the main road, we went up the hill. *Oh, okay.* Instead of going to Carrington, we went up the hill. *Oh, okay.* You'd have had to make a left turn to go to Carrington, but we didn't turn. We just went straight. *So did you have neighbors out there?* Yes, we had a family called Cousins, Reginald Cousins and his wife Doris and they had two girls. They left. I don't know when they left the island, but they left the island.

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Were the girls around your age?

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No, no, they were younger.

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Did you have any playmates?

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Well, I had a brother who was two years older than I and he and I hunted and fished, dug clams, picked oysters. This was Depression so we did all the things we had to do to survive. And Mother had a big garden which we were ordered out to look after once in a while. And, uh... Playmates, I don't know. I knew all the kids around there, you know, the young people. *Who were the other kids?* It was the Tooker family out of Coulter Bay. Mrs. Tooker and Frank and Bertha and Eddie. *Were they very far from you?* Oh, a couple of miles. We used to walk back and forth. It didn't matter.

0:02:46

Did you know Peter Police? 0:02:51

Very well. We used to go out and fish in the lakes above Peter's. They call them Blue Sky Lakes or something now. But we just called them Barrett's Lakes because a family called Barrett used to own a house that was on the lake. It's a big house there on the lake. And the most beautiful field of daffodils you ever saw in your life. But then when we'd be coming down from the lakes, Peter would always come out and holler at us, Go in have some to eat with Peter. So we'd go in and have dinner with Peter. Oh yes, he was a good cook. Very good cook. And he made homemade wine. I guess it was wine. And one night my brother and I went in there and he was making dinner. He was growing up. So he was frying chicken and making bacon and butter biscuits and all kinds of... And so first of all he gave us a glass of this dandelion wine. And I took a sip of it. I can't drink that! There was a big plant sitting beside me and I just dumped it in the plant. But he just walked in and said, Oh, you needa more wine, you needa more wine. He was Italian. So he grabbed this glass and took it back out of the kitchen and gave me more wine. God, I killed that plant. But anyway, I did. He came down from Mother's to the house, oh, two or three days after that, and said that he'd had us in for dinner. And he said, but my plant, she's dying, And Mother said, you're plants dying, what did you do to it? He said, nothing, didn't do a thing to it, kept it watered, looked at it, but his plant's died. Do you know, Mrs. McLean, what happened to my plant? No, mother said, I haven't any idea what happened to your plant. But after Peter had gone home, I told mother, I said, I know what happened to his plant. His damn dandelion wine killed it. Would have killed me and killed the plant. So, yeah. Oh, Peter.

Did he work on the island?

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No. He was a veteran. He had a pension.

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It was, of course, a small pension, but prices were small. And the \$30 he got for an army pension supplied him amply because he was alone and he had a garden and stuff so he didn't, he did very well in his pension. In fact those days, the Depression days, he was about the only person that had any money. And he came down one time and he wanted my brother and I, well one time we were in there I guess, and he wanted us to write a letter. He wanted a wife. So we concocted a letter. And he couldn't read or write. We devised this letter, sent it off the paper, and some woman answered it. Her name was Violet, her first

name, I don't know her last name. Anyway, she moved up to, moved up, and Peter was delighted, they were fine. But Violet didn't work out very well. I guess she was too isolated, she didn't like it there or something. He lived so far out. Anyway, they split up. So she was leaving and he checked some box she'd packed and it was full of his best pots and pans. So he chased her upstairs and left her there and he went down and took his pots and pans out of her luggage. And she had phoned for, there was a woman in the store called Mary Thompson and she had a horse and kind of a buggy wagon thing and she'd gone out to pick this woman and her stuff up and take her down to the boat, catch the boat, Union Steamship. So she got out there and she had to persuade Peter to let this Violet down the stairs and they collected her stuff and away she went as they had found her. He was so funny. We had a dance in the old, well it was a, we called it the Church Hall, but it was a community hall but they had built a kitchen on the back and then they built a chancel for the church, for the holy service. And when we had dances we just closed the doors, the big folding doors, and they closed those doors on the chancel. And he came down one night, we were at this dance, it was about two o'clock in the morning, and Peter had gone home. He was always great at the dances, and he'd gone home. So, little while came back, and he had a cane, and he bashed on the floor, and he said, Peter has seen the bear! And of course we all started ribbing him about the bear. But he wouldn't let any of us go home in case this bear attacked us on the way home. We'd never seen a bear. I don't know what he's talking about. And so we all stayed till daylight. Just carried the dance on till daylight. The Church of Columbia, we used to have Dr. Green, Alan Green, he was a wonderful person. And he used to tell us we could have dances Saturday night, but he wanted the church cleaned and set up for church by, I don't know, about 11. I think it was about 11 they had service. And so we would have to, there was a canvas that we put on the floor of the church hall when they had church, when we weren't dancing on it. And so we'd have to roll out that canvas and set out all the chairs for, (instead of pews, it was just chairs) fix it all up and open the chancel doors and set up the altar. One time I crocheted an altar cloth and I used to go around the neighborhood for flowers and stuff to put on the altar and I went down to Robertson's one time, old Mrs. Robertson was still alive, and she said to me, Mary, you should go to church. I didn't go to church. I said, but I don't say that you shouldn't go, Mrs. Robertson, so I don't see why you should tell me to go. So anyway, we used to have our dances in that hall. It was a lot of fun. And well, they had a Christmas party every year. Turkey and all the trimmings. And there were some people who lived out, let's see, out on Sawmill Road, right out on the beach. Malcolms lived out there, and these two women. There was two sisters. One was Alice Strange, and I forgot the other one's name. But they had a brother. They had a little sawmill out there. They had a brother. And I think they had a mother and father at one time. But their brother went out looking for some... for hunting or something on Read Island. And he fell off a bluff or what happened to him. But he was found about a year later. His body was found. And Miss Alice and her sister lived there. Then... *What was his name?* I don't remember his name. I don't think I ever saw him. I think he was probably dead around the time that I first went there. I don't remember him at all.

So was that the sawmill that was at the mouth of Carrington? No, no, no, no. This was... I don't know how well you know Whaletown, but there's a... A road comes up from the store and a

branch goes off to Carrington Bay, but when you get up to Olmsteds, there's another branch goes that way and that's Sawmill Road, and it was called Sawmill Road because these people had a sawmill there. And old Malcolm lived down there and his kids, but he logged, Malcolms logged. And this was Carrington Bay, and out here was the lakes and Pete's house was on Carrington Bay. And there was a sawmill out at Carrington Bay. *Ah, so there were two sawmills.*

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Yeah, called, I think that sawmill was on Jane Island.

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Jane Island was just on the other side of Carrington. And, where is that now? Oh, I don't remember.

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Doreen told me to there was a sawmill at the mouth of Carrington, so that's why I was wondering if that was on your [?].

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No, no.

0:12:37

There was one down here as well as the one down there.

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There was one on Jane Island, yeah, as well as the one that...

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Would people get lumber for their houses?

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Oh, yes. Yeah, they had a lot of... I guess the Stranges actually did well until their brother died, and then of course they closed the mill. But Jane Island mill ran longer, I think. It was another Jane Island.

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Did your parents build that house?

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Yeah. My dad and I built it.

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Your dad and you?

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Mm hhh. And of course if it was a dance or a party or something going on, I'd just decamp. Dad used to say, that's right, that's right. When work interferes with pleasure, cut out the

work. He wasn't very serious about it, but he often thought I should stay home and work instead of go and gad around the country.

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Were the dances fun?

0:13:42

Oh yeah, yeah, they were fun. We didn't have a proper... We had different people. It was Mrs. Houghton-Brown, she used to play for the dances. Now they had... They lived across the Gorge down here, on the point that runs out from the mouth of the Gorge, a point runs up there, and they live out on that point. I don't know who lives there now.

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What would she play?

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The piano? Yeah. And Billy Ballantyne used to play sometimes.

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Just whatever we could scare up for a pianist we got,

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anything went. *And did you go to school there?* No.

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Had you already finished school?

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I'd finished grade eight and I...

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Well, I could have got correspondence, I guess,

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but nobody bothered about it, so of course I didn't. I like roaming around the woods with my brother better than going to school.

How did you get water to your house? Do you remember what the conditions were like? Oh, it was well. And you just had a thing that wheels up. A windlass, they called it.

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And did you carry, then you'd carry the water into the house?

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Yeah.

0:15:16

How did you do the laundry?

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With the water from the well. *Yeah, and did you do it inside?*

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Well, if it was raining out, you didn't go out and do it outside.

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No?

0:15:25

We washed in the kitchen with a tub and a faucet, with all the little stuff everybody's got. *I've grown up in a time of washers, so I find it kind of fascinating to hear how people used to do their laundry. Oh. People would talk about their mothers bringing the laundry down to the stream and scrubbing*

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it down there, you know? Mm-hmm. I guess because you had a well, you didn't have to do that?

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No, not when you were in the stream. But, yeah.

Did you ever see any cougars? Yeah. Yeah?

0:15:43

Once or twice.

0:15:44

0:15:54

once or twice, but they're very shy. They don't like to be seen.

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You know, we said, well, my brother and I were hunting all the time practically and we saw the grouse and deer stuff and so we wandered around through the brush a lot. We'd catch some glimpse of a cougar once in a while, but they vanish fast. They didn't like people. They weren't so brave and bold as they are now, coming down, chomping up a kid and all the rest of it. But I suppose that they're, they've been restricted to a certain extent because of people moving into places, you know. They've got to eat too, right? I suppose they have to eat too.

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How did you learn how to hunt?

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You just take a gun, you go out and shoot.

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That's how I learned.

Do you remember the Davises? Davises, let's see. No. There was a family called Lewis that lived just up above us, and after Lewis's left, there was some people called Jensen, I think their name was. And there was a man who lived in a cottage closer to us than Louis's and he was called Collinge. I think his name was Collinge. He had an orchard. Used to go out and pick fruit there once in a while.

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Did your family get supplies from off Island?

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Well, from Vancouver. We'd get the Union Steamship.

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It used to come twice a week or three times a week, something like that. And if you wanted sugar and stuff like that, you sent to Woodward's, or one of the big stores in Vancouver, Spenser's.

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Would you go down and greet the steamship?

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Everybody went down and greeted the steamship. Well, it used to get in about four or five o'clock in the morning, but it never pulled out until later. And the big treat was to be able to go on board and get an ice cream cone. That was a big deal. Because they didn't have any refrigeration in the store, so they couldn't carry ice cream. So, [unclear]

0:18:46

You mentioned that Peter Police had a telephone. Or you said that Violet phoned out by telephone?

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No, no. No, she sent, just sent word out by him. He had taken the message down to the store.

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Oh, I see.

0:19:01

It was in the...

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So you meant by call, like sent word out?

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Yeah. Okay. *Do you remember when telephones came to the island?*

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Yeah. And there was only one. Well, there was 28. There was one at the store at Whaletown,

and one at Manson's, the store, and then some people around Manson's had telephones. And this is much later, of course. And I can remember a man putting in a call to Finning Tractor for parts for his cat. And as soon as he put the call through, telephone receivers went down all over the place. And of course he couldn't hear anything and he couldn't get his message across. So he just said, for heaven's sake, everybody hang up. I'm just ordering parts and it isn't going to do you any good to listen. So just hang up and let me talk. So you could hear the receivers going back up. I suppose they thought it might be interesting from a gossip point of view or something. He wasn't interested. He just wanted to get his message across to Finnings.

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Do you have a rough idea what the population might have been?

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I don't know. If you took in the whole island. I don't... *Would it be hard to estimate?* Yeah. It would be for me. I mean, I... Let's see. *Who lived in Manson's?* Oh. The Smith girls. Frances Smith's aunts. They all lived over there. And you might see them if you wanted. Well, May knows them probably, knows all about that. But I think that they were born and raised there. Their mother, Mr. Smith drowned in a row boat in a storm or something. And then her mother married again, a man called Mr. Piper. And she lived to be very old. They had a 90th birthday party for her at Quadra, I think.

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So that would be a different Smith than Nellie Smith and that family, would it?

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Yeah, yeah, they're different.

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So these are the Smiths from Manson's?

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from Manson's? Well, I don't think they were from Manson's. They were at Bull Point. Bull Point or...

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Oh, over there.

0:21:49

Seaford. I think they were from around Seaford.

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They were from around Seaford. Well, where was it that Nellie Smith was from, who is now Nellie Jeffery?

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Oh, and Nellie was one of them, I guess. Sure. Yeah. And she married Baron Jeffery. And the Jefferys are an old Manson family.

0:22:08

As the Mansons were.

0:22:10

So did your family know anyone when they moved there?

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No. *Do you know why they chose Cortes?* Just liked the idea, I guess. I don't know.

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Can you, I don't know if you felt this, but did you feel Cortes was special at the time when you were living there? Oh yes, I liked living in Cortes.

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What was special about it?

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Oh, well just the freedom I guess, and the lack of noise.

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It was only one or two old cars, and uh... And the people at the store owned an old car and my brother fixed it up. He was a monkey wrencher at heart anyway, so he fixed this old thing up and got it ready. *Who was your brother?* Bert. Bert McLean. But he's dead. He's been dead for seven years.

And who owned the store at that time? A woman called Mary Thompson and her husband, Nick Thompson, and they had a man, an elderly man that lived there with them. I think he had an interest in the store. His name was Robinson. He was no relation to the Robertsons. He was Robinson. And everybody called him Uncle Bill. And he lived at the store. They had four rooms above the store. And I can remember Mrs. Tooker telling us one time that when she first went up the island, they put a lot of land up for, what do you call it, redemption, what do they call it?

0:24:02

Preemption?

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Preemption, yeah. And her husband had put in for this piece of land and she had to stand in a line in Victoria or in Vancouver and hold a kid, she had one kid, the oldest one, Frank. And then they insisted that somebody had to live on it. So she had to move up there. So she came up and he was there. He was a painter in Vancouver. He painted houses, you know, inside. And he was hardly involved. Anyway. *Who's that?* Frank Tooker. He was old Frank Tooker. But anyway, so Mrs. Tooker got off the boat at four o'clock in the morning or something, and

she went to the store, and they had four rooms upstairs. They still had, I think they still had four rooms upstairs in the store. But anyway, they had four rooms. And so she went in and she asked Mrs. Thompson if she could get a room where she could have a rest until her husband came up to meet her, came down to meet her. So, oh, yes, she said so. She took her upstairs and Mrs. Tooker, she looked at the bed that hadn't been slept in and she said, oh, this is a nice clean room, Mrs. Tooker. It was just a clean minister that slept in it. So Mrs. Tooker said, my God, they want me to put my baby out in sheets another person slept in. She didn't stay there. But her husband showed up and took her out to the place that he had fixed.

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So did you know the Tooker family very well?

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Oh, quite well. Mrs. Tooker was quite a character. *In what way?* Well, she went everywhere. She walked. And she'd go out and play cards or anything and she'd fiddle off home at midnight, didn't bother her a bit, go through the trail with a flashlight. And she was very nice. She was always friendly and sociable. And if you said anything about anybody, she'd say, oh, but he's good to his mother. That was her. I used to think, my God, maybe he's good to his mother, but he's no good to humanity. However, that was just my idea.

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So do you know why the library in Whaletown was named after?

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Oh, she instigated it, getting it. She was the first one that worked on it. She belonged to the Women's Institute. I think at one time she was president of the Women's Institute. I'm sure she was. And she really worked to get the library. And that building that the library is now in was built by the Farmers Institute. They had a thing called the Farmers Institute. And they used to have whist parties and things and meetings and whatnot down in that little shack. And, uh, but when Mrs. Tooker persuaded the government to give us the library, there was nowhere to put the library. So the Farmers Institute was kind of going out anyway. There wasn't very many members left and they wasn't doing much, so they gave the building to the public library.

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So did she used to... was she the first librarian?

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Mm-hmm.

0:27:36

Yeah.

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Did she walk all the way from Coulter Bay?

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Oh, of course. She used to walk down there two or three times. She never bothered her. It didn't bother any of us. We walked those distances. My brother and I used to walk over to Squirrel Cove. And lots of times. It was a trail down past what was Kendrick's. And they were another family. They usually wanted you to have a cup of tea and broke your walk. And Jardines lived on that road, on that trail. *Who?* Jardines.

0:28:19

Oh. I've never heard of them. Do you know any stories about Jardine?

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Well, I know Mr. Jardine was an awful joker. But anyway, Mrs. Jardine, they had a daughter, Jean. Jean lived at Mansons until three or four years ago, I guess. Her husband died and I think she left when he died.

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What kind of joker, what kind of jokes did he have?

0:28:53

Well, he just...

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Well, there was two men in Squirrel Cove. One was the storekeeper, Emory, I think his name was Emery, and the other was Middleton, who had the machine shop and Old Bill would go over and he'd tell Middleton things that Emery had said and then he'd go to say Emery and he'd tell him what Bill said and they were at loggerheads and he laughed. He'd say, Middleton and this old Emery guy were fighting.

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He had stirred up some trouble.

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Do you remember the day you arrived on Cortes? I know I went by the Union Steamship. I was out there early in the morning. *Did you travel by yourself?* No, my dad came down to Vancouver to meet me. I came with Beaverdale by train to Vancouver and my dad met me in Vancouver. And I went with him.

0:30:07

Do you remember if you were excited or nervous? Nothing to be nervous about, nothing bothering me.

Do you remember any medical emergencies or fires or anything like that? Not on Cortes. I don't remember any fires. Medical emergency, let's see. The last thing I'd be interested in anyway is a kid. Yeah, right. I didn't care about... You'd be glad to have your friends, I guess.

0:30:37

Yeah.

0:30:38

Nothing medical did I ever... *Was Peter Piper pretty healthy?* Peter Police. *Peter Police?* Peter Police. Oh yes, he was healthy. *Was that his real name, Peter Police?*

0:30:58

Mm-hmm. He used to go to the...

0:31:02

He used to go to elections. And he would go down to be scrutineer at the polls, you know, to make sure that nobody came in, as if he'd know the difference. Anyway, he would come to the polling booth and he'd dap this old [?] of his, and he'd say, I am Peter the Police. He never said Peter Police, he'd say, I am Peter the Police. He had an old black horse, a big, big, oh, it was a fat horse. I guess he fed it well. He used to ride it and he was a short, stout man. And his legs would stick out like this on the horse's back. Oh, there's Peter. He had two things[?]

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