Renee DeWilde

Interview

November 28, 1972

Length: 51 minutes and 46 seconds

[*The interviewer does not introduce himself but he is referred to as Mr. Ironside*.*] The interviewer notes that he is speaking with Mr. De Wilde at 155 Blake Street in Barrie. Renee is believed to be the first person to grow tobacco in Simcoe County. He was born in Belgium and came to Canada in 1924. Renee came to Simcoe County in 1940 and that was when he started growing tobacco and then moved to Barrie in 1950. During his first years in Canada, he worked in [*inaudible*] Leamington during the harvesting season of tobacco for about 6 weeks. They did that every year for about two years before starting to grow it himself in Elgin County. He grew Burley tobacco with his father on a small scale. They grew two crops in Elgin County and then in 1929 he went to [*place name is inaudible; possibly Belle Ewart*] as a hired man to grow crops with an older man. The man could not drive his own car and did not know much about tobacco so he hired Renee to grow it for him. Renee worked for this man for a year. Renee was married in 1930. He grew tobacco in [*place name is inaudible*] for about nine years. In 1939, a friend of his moved to Wasaga Beach and, when visiting Renee, told him that there was nice land in Wasaga Beach. Renee took his advice and looked for tobacco land there in 1939 with two other couples. They had trouble finding the area and stopped at a hotel in Creemore to ask for help. A man there explained the family land in the area to him.

Before going back home, Renee and the two other couples bought a farm. The other two sold theirs but Renee moved in to the farm in 1940. Renee knew the land was good because it was light and sandy but the climate would be a gamble. He went all the way to Midhurst and Angus to learn about the climate and got year round temperatures. The Midhurst findings were bad but the Angus ones were good so he bought the farm. In 1939 the tobacco price went down

which also scared the other two couples off. Renee says he did not grow too much tobacco the first year; only about nine acres. He spent all his money on the farm so he had to go to the Bank of Montreal in Creemore because he did not have enough money to build a farmhouse. The man at the bank tried to talk him out of getting into tobacco but Renee did not listen. The nine acre crop became split amongst the three of them because the other two that sold their farms helped Renee. Renee had to ship his crop to a new tobacco company because they were not part of the marketing board so could not ship it to certain companies. Renee still got a good price for the tobacco the first year and there were no problems. However, it took three years for that company to pay Renee for the tobacco. The company was new and they had to process and sell the tobacco before they could pay Renee. Renee needed that money so in the meantime he grew some potatoes and had cattle. He grew tobacco on a small scale [*Tape cuts out and then resumes*] for four years and did not have a frost killing crop until 1946. The frost killed about a third of his crop on September 4th. He was growing Virginia* Tobacco at that time.

In 1945, lots of people started coming in because they heard about Renee growing tobacco there. With the first crop he sold, the company really liked his tobacco. When he took it in they graded it and hung it up. Someone told Renee that they held it there so that people from Montreal could see it. He was able to grow nice tobacco there; it was almost as good as the farms down South but the climate was a bit trickier. The interviewer says that Alan Blair*did a study about growing tobacco. At one time there were over 100 tobacco farmers in Simcoe County. Renee says today they are going out, faster than they came in. The first farm he had in New Lowell was 230 acres and he was allowed to grow 72 acres of tobacco. After a few years he kept cutting the acreage down; as much as 30%. Some growers had 45 acres of farm and it was cut in half. Four or five years ago, they allowed the farmers to sell their rights. Renee sold his farm in Angus in 1961 for $70,000. The land on the farm was becoming more and more valuable.

It was difficult for Renee to find experienced help; they would go to other, more popular areas to work first. Renee had two boys come up from North Carolina to help him farm. The people that generally came to work on the farm would be from up north or Quebec and once

they made some money or had experience they would leave. They preferred to hire experienced workers but they took what they could get; it did not take the inexperienced workers very long to learn. It was very hard work to harvest tobacco. They used to have to bend down to get the bottom leaves and it would hurt their legs and back. Now there are machines that allow them to do it without that strain. Renee has seen 14 and 15 years olds do it. The first few leaves that come off are from the bottom and are called sand leaves. You can pull two or three leaves during the first harvest which takes about a week. By that time, new leaves have grown so you can go back and pull another two or three leaves. After that, you keep going over the field every week. There are usually over 20 leaves per plant and can harvest about 4 or 5 leaves at a time in the fall. One grower would only grow one strain of tobacco. However, they would grow different varieties of the same strain. Most of the seed growers were in [*place name is inaudible*].

Renee learned how to grow tobacco in Canada; he didn't do it in Belgium. He grew from 1940 to 1961, but during that time he sold farms. He bought his first farm in 1940 and he sold it in 1946. The first farm was on Concession 4, Lot 22 and 23; it was 230 acres with 72 acres of that being tobacco fields. The man he sold it to did not do very well on it and he did not pay taxes to Renee. Instead of taking away the entire farm from the man, Renee took some of the acres of land back as a way for the man to pay him back. This allowed for the man to continue farming and making a living.

The interviewer asks about Dutch auctions. Renee says that's the way they sold tobacco down South. A Dutch clock is four feet across and has numbers on it. Renee forgets now, but he thinks it started with $1 and kept going down to one cent. The buyers would have already been in the warehouse, seen the farmer's tobacco, and graded it; so they knew which one they wanted. The farmers would be numbered so the buyers knew the number but not the name of the farmer. If the buyer wanted to pay 70 cents for a certain tobacco, they would wait until the clock went down to 70 cents and then push a button which would stop the clock. Price would be based on pounds (70 cents for one pound) and that price would also change based on the quality of the tobacco. Buyers would have to be careful because if another buyer pressed his button at 72 cents, the one who was waiting for it to get to 70 cents would lose out. Renee says this was a

good, fair way to sell tobacco. Tobacco always had to be shipped down to the tobacco markets because the buyers would not come up anymore. Before the marketing board, the buyers would come up to the farms. They would have about eight grades of tobacco. Different types of tobacco would be: bright*, different darks, some reds, two different greens, and scrap. Once it was graded, they would bail it and cover it in paper. The companies would let them know how many bails they wanted and then the farmers would ship the number of bails directly to the factory. The factories he shipped to were in Delhi. Now they charge about $11 a pound to ship to Delhi.

Renee says there were a lot of hard times in the start. One year, in Angus, his tobacco was all planted and cultivated and then after a few days of cultivating the wind came along and blew the whole crop up. The tobacco plants were small and the sand blew against the plants and it burned the plants and Renee lost almost his whole crop. There was no wind insurance for farmers that year and it was too late for Renee to replant. He did not think he would have a crop that year but after a few weeks the crop looked like it was coming along again and the plants had healed. Another time he went to the bank and when he came home he had lost the entire crop to hail; that was the only season that he did not have hail insurance. Renee used horses for a long time (until 1947) but then used tractors after that. The interviewer asks what the other local farmers thought of Renee. Renee says that the only thing that other farmers did not like about him as a tobacco farmer in the area was the high wages that he was offering to workers. He came into New Lowell by himself as a Belgian surrounded by Canadians and all the people were very welcoming. He was paying workers $3 a day on his farm, while all the other farmers were paying $1.50 to $2. The wages kept going up every season. After the war years it was up to $20 a day.

The interviewer says that they would like to put a plaque up in the area where Renee's first farm was. He explains that the Simcoe County Historical Association together with Simcoe County Council examines and recommends two plaques a year for different things. That first farm would be a good candidate because it was the first tobacco farm in the area. The interviewer asks if Renee got any assistance from the Agricultural Representative in the area. Renee says they never asked for any help. Most people in the area did not pay much attention to

tobacco farmers in the early days. At first it started on a small scale and then boomed in 1945. Once a man from the Toronto Globe and Mail came and wrote an article about the tobacco farming in Simcoe County and how the tobacco industry was booming. Renee has a copy of the newspaper and the interviewer advises him to take it to the Simcoe County Museum to be photocopied so there will be a copy on record. Renee lost his copy for a while but a woman that used to live next to him saw his name in the article and mailed him a copy of it a few years ago. Renee says that the tobacco farms are leaving Simcoe County rather quickly and he does not like that because he worked hard in the area and had a lot of memories of the tobacco industry; he finds it sad. Renee says the tobacco farms were good for the industry and the farms became very built up and highly taxed by the government and they had to leave the area. In the first seven to eight years that he was growing tobacco he did not have an irrigation system and had to put one in. Luckily in Angus there was a good river near his field. [*Tape cuts out*]

[*Tape resumes*] The interviewer would like to make a correction on tape. Earlier in the interview, when Mr. DeWilde was mentioning the lot numbers for his first farm, he may have been thinking of his second farm and gave the wrong numbers. After looking at a map, Renee now says that his farm was the first road west of New Lowell, turning south. This was probably about Lot 3 or 4 of Concession 3. It has a pioneer tobacco farm indication (sign) on it. It was on the left-hand side as you turned south. This should mean that the farm was on Lot 4, but they'd have to check. [*Tape cuts out*]

[*Tape Resumes*] [*At 46:03, a speaker comes onto the audiotape noting that at this point in the interview the previously mentioned Globe and Mail article was read by Renee DeWilde, but that that part of the tape has been lost.*] [*Tape cuts out*]

[*Tape resumes*] The article referred to in the interview by Mr. Ironside* has been found at Simcoe County Archives. The article is from the Globe and Mail from Wednesday July 31, 1946 and is entitled "Sands Produce Gold in Camp Borden Region". [*The speaker beings to read the article*] It reads, "There's gold in the sands around Camp Borden - tobacco gold - and the rush really hasn't started yet although Renee DeWilde, a Belgian Canadian since 1924, made the discovery near New Lowell six years ago. Two other tobacco prospectors came in after Renee to

make a three farm start on sand lone* farms which before had been mixed grain lands and sold for a few thousand dollars to the newcomers. Today there are 21 tobacco farms with new ones being converted almost daily. Farms that changed hands before the war, at seldom over $4000, are now rich tobacco tracks worth all the way up to $40,000 and more. De Wilde was the pioneer and thus has the right to the name 'Pioneer Tobacco Farm' on his big barn in Sunnidale Township. 'I haven't had a bad crop since I started', he said, 'Our big danger is frost but it hasn't hit us hard enough yet to matter. In fact, we checked the weather with the Delhi district (the old tobacco belt) and there isn't much difference.'

With De Wilde the pioneer, Achel* Curly De Schepper, a 42 year old native of Belgium, is New Lowell's almost overnight tobacco king with three farms and 85 acres in cigar and cigarette plants. Curly came to New Lowell in the spring of 1945 with $16,000 in his jeans after share cropping in the Delhi country for 15 years. Good crops from the fine new land find him the biggest grower in the brand new gold belt today. Curly De Schepper left Belgium in 1927 despite the protestations of his parents, worked as day labourer in Montreal for several months, and then got a ride as far as Delhi with a cousin from Detroit. 'I worked in the tobacco fields for a season just to get the hang of the English language and then got into share cropping and really learned the business', he relayed. When he left home, De Schepper told his father and mother they'd never see him again if he didn't make a go of it, but if he did succeed he would be back. He has been back. 'The soil up here is the same as in Oxford County only newer', explained Curly, 'We are growing a few flu cure types and getting fine results. I have been trying to do all the advertising I can to get other tobacco men in here but it's hard to convince them that it can be done in this part of the country'. Incidentally, part of the 29 million dollar in tobacco grown in Canada, as reported in the 1944 statistics, Ontario produced over 26 million dollars' worth. In the new tobacco belt this year, a rough estimate is that one thousand acres of the weed will be added to the province's total. Besides the New Lowell Section 5, several growers have begun operating in the Alliston district, south of Camp Borden. Proof that the area has what it takes to grow prime plants, is that contracts for the 1946 crop were made by manufacturers last spring. De Schepper's land will produce the first cigar tobacco ever grown in Simcoe County this year.

Not only the Belgians are mining the new discovery. Reeves* Snow, a youngish native of North Carolina with a tobacco grower father, came to Canada in 1927 (the same year as De Schepper) and grew tobacco in the Delhi in Langton* district until last year. Reeves* is building new curing kilns while he watches the progress of 'Number 401', a new type of flu curing tobacco originating in Florida. 'I bought the seed from the Quebec experimental farm', he explained, 'It is 10 to 15 days earlier than the ordinary varieties and has a larger leaf'. Original Norfolk County growers, the Lewis brothers, moved to New Lowell last spring and this will be their first crop. Bill thinks it is the best land in Ontario for tobacco. We have to thank the Belgians for finding it. The Lewis boy along with Curly De Schepper are equipping their new kilns with oil heat. As they put it, 'With coal or wood furnaces to do the heating, you're on the job all the time. With oil, it's just a matter of getting up to the right temperature and then you can go to bed'. There's lots of room for the six oil stoves in the big curing houses since they don't take up as much room as the long strings of pipe used to with wood or coal heating. Filled, the kilns hold about one and a quarter acres of picked tobacco leaves." [*Tape cuts out*]

*Note: * Indicates that the word or name is written as it sounded, and therefore may be incorrect.*