



Elsie Curry

Interview

1991

Length: 1 hour, 16 minutes and 9 seconds

[*The interviewer is not introduced.*] The interviewer says that she is at the Bradford West Gwillimbury Public Library speaking with Mrs. Elsie Curry who lives at 73 Holland Street West, in the former Town of Bradford. Present are June Chambers, Anne Coffey, Ken [Joe] Saint, and Irene Moriarty. She begins by asking about Elsie's early family history and local community. Elsie says her father was Arthur Herbert VanOstrand* and her mother was Etta Lillian* Cale of Vandorf, Ontario which is a little village east of Aurora. Her father was of Dutch descent but his family had been in Canada for about six generations. He was born and raised in Vandorf, where his father was born and raised. His great grandfather and his great grandfather's father came from York Mills, and previous to that from Long Island, New York. Elsie's father started a repair garage in 1927 but he was warned that there was already one in Newmarket and Toronto, and that he probably wouldn't succeed. He was a farmer's son, who didn't want to farm. Her mother was a teacher who was born and raised in Toronto and taught in the one room public school at [*inaudible*]. Elsie is the eldest of three. Her sister Marion is less than two years younger and her brother is ten years younger. Her brother lived in the area for some years and had a business there until he retired in 1986.

Elsie went to public school in Vandorf and the old Aurora High School on Wells Street. She started attending the public school when she was seven and it was about a mile away from home. She had to walk through her farm, past the lake, past the farmhouse, out to the 4th Concession (Woodbine Avenue, previously Don Mills Road) and up about half a mile to the school. This was possibly one reason why she wasn't sent to school earlier. Her first teacher was





Ethel Hackey* who taught there for one year; that teacher was quite young and it was a tough school. The school had a furnace instead of stoves. There were no buses to get to the high school. The eldest in the community who could get a car (which was usually a family car) drove them five miles to get there. There were about five or six of them in the car and they would all pitch-in for the expenses. Elsie skipped high school for one year because she had an opportunity to visit an Aunt (her mother's younger sister) in Pennsylvania. It was a real education; she took her all over the place. Elsie's nurses' training took three years at Toronto East General Hospital. After she finished training, she worked at the York County Hospital in Newmarket when it was still a very small building. Male and female patients were on separate floors (men downstairs, women upstairs). Dr. Dale* was a doctor who was there half the time. The director of nurses was Ms. Hill, a quiet little lady. Madeline Case* from Aurora and Blossom Dales* were nurses at the hospital from around this area. Nurses training changed not long after she finished.

Going back to her high school, Elsie remembers teachers [*first name is inaudible*] Adams who was a veteran from World War One and [*first name is inaudible*] Johnson who was also a veteran and taught them physics and biology. Other teachers were Miss Wilkin* and Mrs. Smith. Jack Knowles was the principal. Students living in the country were sometimes late getting to school because of weather, roads and family obligations. The interviewer asks if Elsie remembers any fellow students. She lists people like Jean Ross who lives in Aurora now, Jean's cousin Helen Ross, Elsie's sister, and Don Glass* who lived in Aurora and was mayor at one time.

Elsie was a nurse at York County Hospital doing floor duty for five years before getting married. Dr. Peter Bailey was a single man living in Bradford who boarded at Curry's place with his office next door and he introduced Elsie to her husband, Harvey. They knew each other a couple of years before getting married and in 1948 they came to Bradford. They moved into the same house that she is living in now. At that time, it was her husband's parent's house. His parents lived downstairs and the couple lived upstairs. When they first moved, Elsie missed her colleagues and felt lonely but she got to know people through church and her mother-in-law. Her father-in-law (William Curry) came from the 14th Line in West Gwillimbury (she believes the North Side), east of the #11 Highway. He came with a large family (eight or nine siblings) and





some of them were carpenters, including William Curry and John Curry who lived on John Street. Harvey's mother's name was Matilda Rebecca Archer (Elsie's mother-in-law). She came from a large family as well. Their father died young, leaving his wife [*Matilda's mother*] to raise the family.

Elsie attended Presbyterian Church and belonged to the WA and WMS (Women's Missionary Society). Eventually these two organizations were made into one. Elsie was a secretary for the organizations and taught Sunday school for 10 years, she started when their son Bill was about five years old. She joined the Women's Institute in Bradford in the second year of her marriage (in 1949) and remained a member until it disbanded last year [*The Bradford Women's Institute disbanded in 1990*]. She has been secretary and president for periods of time [*inaudible*] The active members were getting older and sickly and the Institute did not seem to appeal to the younger crowd. It was also more of a rural organization. It got down to eight members who were getting more and more ill and so they felt they couldn't cope with the activities anymore.

During the 1930s, Elsie's husband Harvey had many jobs. He worked at the carriage factory, [*inaudible*] Crake's garage, and Spence Lumber Company. He was paid \$8.00 a week and he was lucky that he lived at home because he wouldn't have been able to support himself during that time. He also helped his dad with carpentry and worked for Art [*last name is inaudible*] doing wall papering and decorating. When he did finally open his own business, the skills he obtained from all these odd jobs really helped him. T.W.W. Evans' property had lots of trees and a big yard with a garden and barn. West of the Evans' property was the property of Art [*last name is inaudible*].

Harvey taught at schools in Hawkstone and Steele's Corners, taking over for a teacher who was ill. They wouldn't get the school grant if they didn't stay open. He spent about two months at Steele's Corners and about two months at Hawkstone. This was years before Elsie married or knew him. One interviewer would like to speak about the "little store" and asks when Harvey opened it. He was selling onions in bags and bushels from his home and his friend Barney suggested he open a place of business to sell other things as well. He was in business for





about 30 years and he stopped in 1975. Mr. Bowser* originally owned the property and wouldn't sell it so Harvey rented. The location of the store is John Street behind the present Bank of Commerce. Harvey called the store the Seed House. Harvey rented the property from Howard Bowser* in 1941. He sold seeds to the marsh farmers who were his main customers. In 1952, Harvey was able to buy it from Howard's daughter after her father had passed away. Joe notes that, in that time, 70% of people in Bradford rented their homes instead of owning. Elsie asked [named is inaudible] how many people there were in Bradford in 1948 and he said about 500 families (approximately 1,500 people). Joe says that during The Depression the population got as low as 900. Then in the boom years of the 1950s, it got up to 2,200. Harvey finally owned the property that the store was on in 1953. He also had a Sears order office for 20 years which he operated at the same time as the store. He sold the store building when he retired and then the Bank of Commerce was built.

When Harvey first had the store, the interviewer asks if Keith Kilkenny had a furniture store below. Elsie replies that he did. Frank was living by his father (Keith) when Elsie came to Bradford [inaudible] He kept the place on the corner and sold electrical goods. An interviewer asks if Elsie remembers who the doctors were at the time she came to Bradford. When she arrived, Dr. Blackwell had just started. During the war, all the medical students had to be in uniform once they reached a certain stage. The first time she saw him he was in uniform and she didn't realize he was a doctor. He had a practice on Barrie Street, next to the post office. He has since moved to Aurora. Dr. Sinclair and Dr. Judge were practicing when Elsie was in Bradford. Dr. Judge was on Holland Street. He later moved to Toronto and passed away from cancer. The dentist at the time was Dr. Colts*. Kay Spence* was a hairdresser who used to do Elsie's hair. She had an office on Barrie Street.

An interviewer asks if Elsie knows who organized the street dances in Bradford in the late 1940s and 50s. Elsie does not know, but she had her first date at one of the dances. Lloyd Graham's father Herb was very good at dancing the Waltz. Bands would play on the back end of trucks. An interviewer asks if the Lions would be the ones who organized that. Elsie says no, they probably weren't in existence at that time. The Women's Institute is the oldest non-church





organization in Bradford other than the Masons. The Lions came after the Women's Institute. They don't know who organized the dances.

An interviewer asks Elsie where she was the day Hurricane Hazel hit in 1954. She says it had been raining steady for a week and the ground was getting wetter and wetter. She was working at Dr. Blackwell's office at the time and had been there since 1949. She started there a year after she was married; she needed her first year of marriage to learn how to cook and be a housewife. She remembers that the hardest thing for her to learn was how to pour tea when visitors came over and to have all the food ready at the same time. One day a lady came over with some other guests and she was all dressed up with a hat on; that was a surprise to Elsie. She worked as a part-time receptionist and nurse at Dr. Blackwell's office for eight years. The Women's Institute helped a lot with the relief efforts after Hurricane Hazel. They phoned around to all the members, asking for help. Elsie had a young couple stay in her home after the hurricane named J.P. Winter* and Irene VanLuyk*. Irene currently works part-time in the bakery across the road from Elsie. They weren't married then but had sent away for their engagement ring and during their time spent at Elsie's house (about a week) the ring came. They had coffee and a cake to celebrate. They married about a year later and lived just off the south end of the marsh. They raised five kids and now have a number of grandchildren. At the town hall, there was a large cook stove which the Women's Institute would use to cater the Lions' dinners twice a month. They used this stove to cook dinners during Hurricane Hazel.

An interviewer asks if Elsie remembers any fires that occurred in Bradford. She remembers the big one on the north side in 1957 when Bill was born. She walked down the south side of the street with her baby carriage and it was quite a catastrophe on the north side; businesses and apartments were burned down. Mrs. Bannerman* had a store and living quarters there at the time. The fire started in a basement and there were no walls in between so it just roared right through and stopped at the bank. There was no one hurt in the fire. They rebuilt that side of the street afterwards with some new ownership [*inaudible*] Bill Green* had a refrigeration appliance store. There was a clothing store, restaurant, and bake shop. A Dutchman named Cleese* came later with his shoe store. Elsie has seen quite a few changes on the main





street. It is not as lively as it used to be. On a Saturday night, stores would be open until 11pm so her husband was busy all day. Sometimes he and the girls would go out after they closed to get an ice cream or something to eat. Joe says the women would be talking to each other and leave their shopping to do until 10pm. Elsie remembers one woman left her three children with her husband while she did the shopping. The husband was so busy talking that the kids ran off. Elsie says there was more socializing in those days.

An interviewer would like to discuss Elsie's immediate family. They had one boy named Bill who currently lives on Agar Avenue in Bradford but is moving to Aurora. He married Mary Anne Linda Gould* from Jackson's Point. They have two kids, April who is seven and Aaron* who is five. Now that Elsie is retired, she enjoys gardening, knitting, and volunteering with the Cancer Society. She was on the Education Committee for a number of years. The Women's Institute has been instrumental in helping the Ontario Federation of Agriculture educate students in schools about farms.

Elsie worked a bit before doing her nurses' training to earn money to pay for it. She did a number of different things. She worked as household help at different places and at a summer resort south of Callandar, which was very enjoyable. While working at the summer resort, she saw the famous quintuplet children through one-way glass at the "exhibit" (these quintuplets were a tourist attraction). They were about four years old at the time. To get to the resort, Elsie's mother drove her and her sister who was also working in the area that summer.

Joe asks if Elsie's father built the garage in Vandorf and she replies that he did. The original garage was wood and the house was grey stucco. Officials warned her father that they would eventually be lowering the road to allow room for heavy trucks so if he was going to build he should do it on the east side of the road, which he did. She doesn't know when this happened since she was 19 or 20 and away from home.

June asks about Elsie's later nursing career. When Elsie's son was 10 years old, she started doing home care as a nurse and worked in a nursing home. She worked for Norma Noble in a small retirement home in Bond Haven (which is June's current house). There she looked after





Mrs. Nolan, Fred's mother Mrs. Cook, Sam Quinn*, Mrs. Stewart, Joe Evans, and Will Ritchie. In that retirement house, there were about 12 to 16 residents. Betty [*last name is inaudible*] also worked there and Devitta* Richardson (maiden name Andrews) was the RN for the home. She grew tired of being on-call for 24 hours so Elsie took her place. Elsie worked part-time at Martindale Villa* on Barrie Street which is now TLC. Then she worked steady for [*inaudible*] and that's when she got her car. She also worked in many different houses doing home care in Bradford and other areas. In this capacity, she looked after Ernie Peterman* and [*name is inaudible*] in Glenville. In the house of the latter patient, she had to deal with many pets including a dog that bit her. That was also where she had her first encounter with a microwave oven. Elsie looked after Mrs. Stewart McKenzie* in her home as well. When she did home care she would cook meals for the clients and give them treatments or medicine but would not do house cleaning. She would be paid by the individual or their family. She has taken care of many people who were dying such as her good friend Myrtle Ritchie*, [*inaudible*], and Mrs. Lancier*. [*Tape cuts out*]

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

Note: The interview is dated based on Elsie mentioning that she was a member of the Bradford Women's Institute until it "disbanded last year", the Bradford chapter closed in 1990.

