



**Mike Asselin**

*Interview Two*

May 2, 1974

Length: 1 hour and 2 seconds

Jack Coleman introduces himself and Peter Moran who are at the home of Mike Asselin in Perkinsfield. This is the second trip to talk to Mike to learn about his social history. Mr. Coleman asks Mike about life before 1900 and what life was like to him as far back as he can remember. Mike says when he was a child they were very poor and that is all he can remember. His earliest recollection is when he was in his mother's arms at church. She took him to the window and all the men in Perkinsfield had guns on their shoulders with red coats. That is the first thing he remembers and he was about two years old. Mike was a sickly child and did not start school until May 1 at the age of 7. Mike remembers having his father have to take him to school because he had never been anywhere outside his home. His mother would bake in a wooden box with Keys\* mustard and he learned his letters on that box. By the time he went to school he knew his letters and could read quiet well. There was a man from Montreal there and he put Mike in the baby class and after the lesson he put Mike in part 2 of the class because he knew how to read already. The school was located 1 mile south of Perkinsfield and he lived another mile south of that. Mike would walk back and forth to school when he went alone.

Mike had no underwear for winter so his mom would put flannel in the pants and his mother made all their clothes. When Mike was 11 his mom made him a suit for his first communion. She had made him a vest and at 13 he was going to be confirmed and the boys was in the church and Mike was standing in front coming out and the girls were waiting on the sidewalk. One of the girls said to her companion look at the boy from Perkinsfield his vest is too short and that made Mike laugh.





Mike remembers walking a mile to get the teachers soup and would fight for the privilege to walk the mile so that they'd get a one cent stick of marshmallow. Mike went to a bilingual school with 50 pupils and one teacher and that he learned a bit of English. Mike's neighbour was Nightingale and he remembers being in the field with him and learning English from him. Before Mike turned 12 his family moved north. Mike then had to go to school at Lafev's Corners\* and they were mostly English and there was a young Irish teacher there named Bill Cocklin\*. He did not teach the same way as the French teacher and after a month a half Mike quit when he was 12. Bill Cocklin\* later became a famous surgeon. Mike remembers one fall when he was 10 his dad kept him home for three weeks to pick roots and would pick roots and then throws them on the fire. Mike explains this was common for kids to be kept from school to help on the farm. That was the way it was until people were able to buy machines.

Mike started working in the bush with his dad when he quit school; his dad bought him an axe. Mike says he was not good with the axe but was good with the cross saw. From time he quit until spring he cut 83 cords of fire wood, hard wood, and it was piled on a sand hill. Mike is asked about maple sugar bush but he did not have any but his neighbour did. He saw them make sugar though and they had 3 iron kettles that they would use for it. Lot 16 concession 11 was where Mike moved to. Mike's father wasn't a farmer he was a bush man and had been his whole life. Mike's dad was also a livestock dealer. He would buy it from the farmers and keep it for a while and occasionally would kill the livestock and sell the meat. Mike's dad had never gone to school. He was only a local dealer, but he always had some money (speaking of deals- once Mike got married the first cattle he sold was for \$15 apiece and that was in 1907). In the bush, Mike was working winter and summer until he was 16. Then his father sold the farm to someone and they decided they would work in a sawmill.

They started walking to Midland and Victoria Harbour to get a job. Finally they found a job in Midland working at Clifford's Mill\*. He made \$1 a day, 7:00am until 6:00pm, working six days a week. Of that dollar he was allowed to spend a quarter a week. It cost him \$3 a week for board. The rest he saved. Mike got tired of working at a Sawmill and went to work at his grandfather's Sawmill where he made 50 cents a day with board. There was nowhere to spend





his money there so he saved it. This grandfather Doane\* was on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Since there was no bank then people would just keep their money. Mike says the money always went home to mother. There were banks in Penetang. Mike says there was never enough money to put in the bank. Farmers would always buy things in cash and not cheque.

When Mike was 19 his father and he cut 580 cords of soft wood along with their farm work. They would get up at 5 and each milk a cow and his mom would make them breakfast and be out in the bush cutting by 6am. Then they would have dinner at 11 and supper at 5 and then work until dark. Mike says his dad had the power of two men and was the toughest man he ever saw. He was half Irish and half French. After they cut all this wood, they had to haul it to the station in Perkinsfield which was four miles away. They had two sets of sleighs, two teams of horses, and everything was ready to go. Then on November 11 there was 18 inches of snow. Mike says the next morning they hitched up horses and went through... They ran four trips to get it all to town. His father was paid for the wood on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Mike says the railroad would take the wood to Toronto to sell it to others. They got \$1.75 a cord for 75 cords of clear pinewood. The rest of it they got \$1.05 per cord.

Mike goes back to when he was 12 years old, when they first moved to this area. The Hayes family was their second neighbour; they had a boy 3 years older than Mike and a girl that was 5 years older than Mike. Mike remembers going to their place quite often. This girl helped Mike learn English a lot. He could speak English but had trouble with it. When Mike was 16 they started taking him to dances in Tiny and Penetang; most of the people there were English speakers. He therefore had the opportunity to learn more English and get to know the people. Mr. Moran notes that it seems the French speakers and English speakers got on very well here. Mike confirms this. However, the English speakers have always seen French as the inferior language. In Europe, French was highly regarded and popular; the English language has many French words.

Going back to Mike's work in the bush, Mr. Moran asks if this work would take up the whole year. Mike says one year it did, but that was an exception. If he wasn't working in the bush, he'd be working on the farm. Mike worked at Grandfather Doane's\* farm for the rest of





the summer. In winter, they cutting down the last pines near Penetang and hired him as a chore boy; he was 17 at the time. He got 25 cents a day. Mike would need to take the cattle to a well in the gully and haul the water up for them to drink (because there was no water at the farm).

After that, he worked with his father until he got married. Mike was 18 and two girls from Lafontaine came with ... and he liked one of them but she had a boyfriend. Shortly after that, he met his wife and they stayed together for three years before getting married. They were chaperoned during this 'courting' phase; mostly they went out on the weekends. His wife had a wonderful singing voice and was trained by the sisters of St. Joseph's. They had a celebration on March 19<sup>th</sup> (for St. Joseph's day) and had a big part in that concert. Mike always tried to be there, and his parents went once. Mrs. Tremere\* and Claude Tremere\* were great singers too. Mike was married on June 20, 1905 and he bought his father's farm for them to live on. He sold it to Mike for \$2800 and it was 100 acres (this was double what his father had originally paid for it). He asked A.B Thompson to lend him money and when Thompson came to the farm, he said it wasn't much of a farm but he'd lend him the money because he trusted him (Mike thinks he probably overpaid for the farm). He cleared four acres of new land with help from a hire. This man then wanted to buy the farm, so he sold it for \$200 more. Then Mike bought the place he's at now (again from his father) which was 100 acres and 25 acres of bush. It was a good farm but very stony. It was mixed farming; he kept cattle and pigs. He grew wheat, barley, oats, peas, and alfalfa. Everything he grew he'd use himself. He put in five acres of potatoes which was his cash crop and he sold cream as well. For a wedding gift, he didn't get much from his parents because his father couldn't afford it. He gave him a team of horses with seven harnesses and a quarter plow. His wife received furniture (a bedroom suite) and a cow.

There were many breeds of cattle (Hereford\*, Durham\*, Nightingale\*, and bulls were a few). When it came to horses, some had ...horses, some had Canadian ones from Quebec. When Mike was 18, two good Percheron\* horses came into the district and his family raised one of them. Some Clydesdales were around too. On his current farm (the second one), Mike would do the trashing with all his neighbours. He had more thrashing to do than everyone else so he paid the difference. They used a steam thrashing machine. There was also a thrashing machine just





run by one team of horses. When he first started thrashing, there was no blower attached to the machine; had to do it manually. One day [*name is inaudible*] came over and he thought the alfalfa field was clover. He harvested his grain fields with a Binder\*. Hay in those days would be all coiled up loose. The peas were very lucrative; \$5 a bag. He harvested them with a pea harvester which was a common mower\* with long fingers installed on it. At the back there were wires which would harvest the peas. During The Depression, he had wonderful peas but couldn't sell them. So he kept them during the winter and sold them to a man in Alliston the following July for 50 cents a bushel. For the peas, they did the thrashing in the field. One year, after Stanley Campbell had thrashed for Mike, his brother Joe came over the next day and said that he would clean the peas around the field left from thrashing and give Mike half. Mike agreed because he thought there wouldn't be much but Joe ended up getting 11 bushels. They never had many split peas because there was rubber in the thrasher that prevented this.

Speaking about the root harvest, Mike grew potatoes, turnips, and ... The potatoes were harvested using a potato digger with a single plow and a team of horses. The turnips were harvested with a hoe. He used to get about 2,000 bushels of turnips and about 1,000 bushels of ... all done by hand. Mike waited until around the 20<sup>th</sup> of June to plant his turnips, after a rain. His rows had ridges done with a turnip sewer. ... were more difficult because you had to twist them with your hand. These root crops were used to feed his stock. Once, when his potato crop failed completely and turnips were in demand, they took wagons to Midland to sell the turnips and they were sold in a day. In 1918 (year of the flu), Mike had five acres of potatoes but the people on the farm (except his wife) were all sick so he went to Penetang and hired a few boys to harvest them. Just as they finished, Frank Hayes came along and bought about 175 bags of potatoes for \$1.75 per bag (90 pounds in a bag). Just as they were unloading these, it was announced in Penetang that war was over. Frank Hayes then said, "The war is over, no more potatoes!". They didn't go to waste though, they were sold in Penetang. Mike grew white potatoes.

Mr. Moran asks about entertainment during that time. Mike says that for many years, his only entertainment was his family. He worked from early morning until dark. He loved reading





during that time. There were sometimes neighbourhood gatherings. The women didn't drink or go out very much. Sometimes the men would gather to play cards and drink. Mike made moonshine for Christmas. It was made from sugar and bran and was clear in colour; some people made it with potatoes. It was distilled with a machine they had. It was a copper boiler with a flat cover with a hole over a stove. Mike was given a fine once from the authorities which was just due to bad luck. His son was coming back from Midland and nearly struck a girl on the road. The OPP from Penetang came to their farm to discuss this and it just so happened they were making moonshine at the time and got caught. There was no money to buy liquor then, so lots of people made their own. Mr. Moran asks if the war had any effect on the crops etc. Mike says everything sold much higher and it was a chance to get ahead. In 1913 ... was selling two heifers for \$52. The Depression was the worst period of time, but in the 1921 things took a drop. He went to Lafontaine during this time and bought a beautiful cow for \$25 (he didn't need them but he bought them for Joe). He also bought seven sheep for \$21. No one used mules in the area.

During Christmas, there was not too much celebration; they went to mass if they could. New Years was more of a celebration day. There was no exchanging of gifts. On Christmas or New Years as a child you would get an orange and maybe a few candies. When he was eight years old, Mike went to Penetang with his father (either before Christmas or New Year's) and there was a fly (*kite*?) about eight inches long and four inches wide, with lots of colours. He really wanted it, and his father bought it for him for 25 cents. The boys from the 7 would come all the way to Mike's to see it in the air. He later sold it to a boy from school.

Mr. Coleman wonders about transportation and how they got around between 1900 and 1910. Mike says it was all horse and buggy (covered in the winter). The French people living there who came from Quebec had parties; they called them suppers. The neighbours would get together and they would put on suppers and sing, but no instruments and no dancing. On New Year's, they would go to Mike's grandfather's. At weddings there were parties and dancing, but nothing elaborate. When Mike got married in Lafontaine, there was a party at his wife's parlor.





They went for a ride around the 17. There were some songs and they had an organ. The parties were always in the home.

Mr. Coleman asks Mike why he thinks he's had a long and youthful life. He says he was always careful and moderate in his actions. He thinks the Lord is the giver and taker and he has faith in that. He's never been really sick, the first time he went to the hospital was last fall. He never drank too much and was careful eating.

Mr. Coleman observes that Mike was interviewed a little while ago for a radio station and would like him to share what they discussed. It was Mike's nephew Romeo\* that made the arrangement for the people to come up from Toronto, and Mike was very glad [*name of radio station is inaudible*]. Mike speaks in French and thanks his interviewers. [*Tape cuts out*]

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

