

## Dante Lenardon Interview – April 22, 2009

HR – Helen Raptis (interviewer)

DL – Dante Lenardon (interviewee)

HR: This is an interview of Dante Lenardon, April 22, 2009 and I am Helen Raptis.

DL: Which is—you could probably know the town, more or less at least the geographical location from the border of Alberta and the States. It was a lovely little town, mining town.

HR: Yes I know where, where, Fernie is.

DL: Yes, first.

HR: I, I've located it on the map here. [laughter]

DL: Oh good, oh very—right now it's a roaring ski resort and I don't recognize my home town any more.

HR: Oh goodness.

DL: But it's a beautiful mountain valley that is exquisite, quite exquisite. But I was born there, went to pub, public school there and high school there and enjoyed school very much. I always loved school. My mother was very keen that I should—on education. And I come from a coal mining family. My father and mother emigrated from Italy in the '20s, and Dad was working in the coal mines until the Depression. When the coal mines stopped working and we lived through the Depression it was difficult times, very difficult time. The area was very badly depressed until the war.

HR: Which, which mine did your father work in?

DL: The coal mine, the coal mines there at Coal Creek. Very dangerous coal mines actually. And interestingly enough, that's where I taught in the rural school there as I'll tell you in a few minutes. But, I went to high school there and then the war was on. Of course, I was 18 years old and I was graduating in Grade 12. And a notice came out from the government, from the the Department of Education, that they needed teachers badly and anyone with Grade 12 plus one Grade 13 could go to normal school.

HR: One, one year or one course?

DL: One course, one course, one Grade 13 course plus Grade 12. Well I had the Grade 12 because I graduated that, at that moment. So what I did is I took a correspondence course in French from the department of education, and did it in 6 weeks.

HR: Oh goodness.

DL: And I got a top A. [laughter]

HR: Oh my goodness! What what year would that be?

DL: That would be 1943, I guess, yeah 1943. I enjoyed it very much and so anyway, I went off to normal school. We didn't have much money, but Mom had saved some money. So I went to Victoria and it was the first time I had ever left my home town so it was quite an experience leaving my home town, of course. Victoria. But I was very lucky I found a very nice place to live, a very lovely lady. And there were 28 girls in the school and two boys. I mean, this was the war and they needed teach—male teachers, of course, but I don't think there were many around. So I had a wonderful year, I enjoyed the year very much. In a way, I realized I did want to be a teacher very much. The school itself, what shall I say, well the faculty were so so. There was a Henrietta Anderson who was a brilliant little woman who—the only PhD they had on the staff. But she was a strong psychologist, she was excellent. There was also a Mr. English. But I don't think he liked me particularly, I don't know why perhaps there was a bit of racial tension there. I mean, you got that impression, being of Italian origin. I'm from northern Italy, so I, I was very blond, I wasn't dark. [laughter]

HR: But he knew you were Italian?

DL: I don't know, I, I have a feeling that was partly it. But then there was a Dr. Denton was the principal who was getting on, he had had a heart attack and so on. The other teachers were, were, were rather nice. There was an art teacher whom my liked. I liked the primary teacher. Her—I was fascinated by her teaching of kindergarten—for primary work. Oh I always thought that was wonderful. And I always had a great affection for teaching Grade 1s. And I think I had some success in it.

HR: Do you remember what her name was?

DL: Pardon?

HR: Do you remember what her name was?

DL: No I don't, isn't that terrible. You know, it's 60 years, you know. [laughter]

HR: Well I, I've got a list here it, it wouldn't be Mrs. Murphy, would it?

DL: No, no it wasn't Murphy.

HR: Miss Beskaby?

DL: Maybe.

HR: Beskaby or James, Mary Anne James?

DL: No I think that second one that you mentioned, that rings a little note.

HR: Miss Beskaby?

DL: But I tell—seems like teacher gave me her model lessons in Grade 1, which I found quite fascinating. But Mr., Mr., Mr. English taught us five—he told me quite frankly after he saw me teaching a course on, on India, India, Indian customs, Indian religious customs which I thought was ver quite well prepared and I enjoyed it. He thought that was terrible. He gave me the impression I was a rotten teacher, I would never make a teacher.[laughter]

HR: Aww, gosh.

DL: But Henrietta Anderson though liked my teaching in especially in the younger grades. She was very nice, she was very—she was a brilliant woman there was no question about it.

HR: What, what was it about Miss Anderson and Miss Beskaby's teaching that, that really—that you found so intriguing?

DL: You mean the Grade, Grade 1, the Grade 1?

HR: Yeah.

DL: Well the way she handled youngsters, you know, these little 6 year olds. Very gentle way teaching numbers. I remember her number work lesson which remained so imprinted in my mi—my memory. The way she handled the, the number lesson. I thought that was marvellous. I was very, very impressed, still remains in my mind. But in any case, I, I enjoyed the the practice teaching. One occasion I, I was asked to take over for—I was teaching at Burnside, that's in Victoria, as you probably know was in Victoria. And the, the principal there was ill for a couple days and I was doing my practice teaching there so I would take over his Grade 8 class, I guess. I was rather terrified. Here was little 18 year old. [laughter] And there's some pretty big boys in that class. But I think I got through it very well, in any case. And the year came to an end and then, of course, I, I did my practice teaching in Coal Creek, that I just mentioned recently. I was there for a month. That was only 5, 5 months.

HR: Sorry to interrupt you, where is Coal Creek?

DL: Coal Creek is 5 miles from Fernie. Doesn't exist anymore. It was a coal mining town. It was quite a big coal mining town in its day with a three room school and three churches and so on and dirty coal, coal (inaudible) were there. Lovely little valley but oh it was (inaudible). But anyway, when I went there for that 1 month of practice teaching it was—there was only one classroom. And it was very nice 'cause I could take the train. It was a 5 mile ride with the coal miners. Well when I'd—then after I went into the service. I was—at 19, you know, we had to decide to go into the army or airforce or whatever. So that was 2 years of my life, not happy years. I, I'm I'm a pacifist to begin with. [laughter]

HR: Aww.

DL: And, and I was for 2 years in the air force. Oh a good experience, I suppose, a very maturing experience. More convinced than ever that I was going to be very happy as a school teacher if I, if I wasn't killed first.

HR: [laughter]

DL: But anyway, toward the end of the war, it was 1945, not quite the end of the war an announcement was made. They were looking for, for, for people who were teachers to get an early retirement, not retirement, but an early—what's the word I'm looking for? To get out of the the services, anyway, early so they could teach. So I applied and they let me out early. And I got a job in Coal Creek where I had done my practice teaching.

HR: So they let you out of the army?

DL: Yes, they let me out, they let me out of the air force, yes. And I'm very happy to get out, like, I must say. Because some of the people I—type of people you meet in in the air services are not the most savoury type of people. [laughter] But that was a wonderful experience, maturing experience, in any case, you know, and. But anyway, I—in Coal Creek I was very happy. I was living at home and able to take that little train. My father was a coal miner so I'd get on with him on the train and get off at Coal Creek. And I was very happy there. The school was a one classroom school, it was a three rooms but there were only one room only. You had about 16 or 18 students I think if I remember. Grade 1 to Grade, Grade 6 wasn't it, yeah. Full of coal dust, of course, but I enjoyed it very much. And the inspector came around a couple of times and seemed pleased. And then at the year I had to go and see the commissioner. There was no mayor in Fernie. They had a commissioner and he was the one that got reports from the rural schools. And I had, I had to drop into see him and he was just delighted with the report I got. He said it was about the best he'd ever had. So I was—that made me very happy because I was quite worried, you know, these inspectors used to scare people. [laughter] I remember when I taught high school for a year, everybody in the staff were scared silly and we all knew the inspector was coming around. [laughter]

HR: Oh.

DL: But anyway, I was pleased that they liked my work. But anyway, I—as I was a veteran I had the right to go to university. The Veteran's Affairs were very generous for veterans, you know, very generous. And so I went back to university with thousands of students. The University of Alberta was just packed with veterans the year I went there.

HR: What, what year was that?

DL: Of Alberta.

HR: What year?

DL: That was 1946 .

HR: '46.

DL: 1946 right. Yeah, because I got out in 1945 and I taught till '46 yes. So I think it was September '46.

HR: When, when—can we back up just a bit?

DL: Sure, sure, sure.

HR: So when you went to Coal, Coal Creek for your practice teaching for 1 month.

DL: Well that was, that was when I finished up normal school.

HR: And what month of the year would that have been?

DL: Oh that was June, I think we all had to go for a month of, of practice teaching in some school, some rural school at that time. So I picked Coal Creek since it was, you know, just a few miles from home.

HR: Okay, and then when you were released from the air force...

DL: And then when I was released from the air force I, I went to a—I got the position at Coal Creek.

HR: And what, roughly, what month of the year was that?

DL: That, oh that was September. We started in September. I got out of the air force in the summer. So in September I started my teaching up at Coal Creek.

HR: So the war had ended by that time?

DL: Well one war had ended. The one in Europe, but the Pacific War was still going on.

HR: Okay and which—where were you mo mostly stationed?

DL: In the air force?

HR: Yes.

DL: Oh at Trenton. I was there primarily in Trenton most of the time. Toronto and then Trenton, I was there most of the time.

HR: Okay.

DL: Mm-hmm. So anyway I, I went back to, to university and I majored in fr—languages, French and German.

HR: Okay.

DL: And got an honours degree with—I had 3 years, I was given 3 years, very interesting. I was given 3 years by the Veteran's Affairs there was one form in. The money they paid us paid for our board, paid for our fees, marvellous! And and I wanted to get out early so I went to see the advisor. I said, "I'd like to take a summer course so I could finish off my degree." And he said, "Well what's your hurry? Because you're doing very well. We'll give you, we'll give you an extra year so you can get your honours degree."

HR: Oh lovely.

DL: I said, "Oh how wonderful!" [laughter] Oh I managed to get back to teaching. Oh I just wanted to get back to teaching. So anyway, I took that year and got my honours degree. And then, of course, I was going to look around for a position in a high school. So I got a job for a year at Cranbrook, Cranbrook, BC, which is about 60 miles from Fernie.

HR: Right.

DL: And I taught high school there, French and English primarily. Enjoyed it very much. It was a new school and the teachers were very nice, and I was near home, I could get home on a weekend so I was very, very, very, happy. I really enjoyed the teaching. There's some difficulties some children were rather undisciplined but aside from that I could handle that, I think, fairly well. I enjoyed the teaching, and I think they were pleased with me, and the principal was very disappointed when I told him at the end of the year I was going to graduate school. He wanted to hold on to me.

HR: Oh.

DL: I, so I registered at the University of Toronto, and went way out to Toronto. And there I spent 3 years in graduate sc—got my MA in French and Italian and then another year I got my PhD in what they call Romance languages, it's French and Italian and Romance linguistics. And it was quite an experience, of course. I mixed with some fascinating people. Toronto, you know, just draws some marvellous people in their graduate school. It's truly one of the best on the continent. But they were tough, too. The teachers there were very—were quite strict, but well worth it. But anyway, I then applied for a scholarship and I got a, a, a Royal Ca, Canada, Canadian scholarship, The Royal Scholarship I think it was called. And I studied in Paris at the Sorbonne. Oh in—but before that, I'm sorry, I left something out if you want to know all the details. After I le—taught, [pause] yes it was after I got my—I graduated actually, I'm sorry, I graduated. I'd a little money left over, and I decided I would like to speak some Italian there so I went to Italy and studied Italian for a year at the University of Rome. And I have relatives, of course, in Italy and I had a cousin in Rome so things worked out very, very well. And I knew some Italian and went to Italian studies there, then I came back and then I taught a year in Cranbrook, I always forget that. And then I had earned money, enough to go back to, to, to go to Toronto for my graduate work.

HR: I see.

DL: And that was 3 years, and I managed quite well, you know, money wise because I taught in the summers. Now that, that's starting in May in the first year my graduate work I got a job, and here I'm getting onto myself again. When I was finishing my degree, perhaps you might wanna know, I got a job in the summers teaching in a rural school near Fernie called Newgate, a one room rural school for 3 months—2 months, May and June. The teacher there, that was a difficult teacher and had to leave, so Mr.—what was Fredricks, I think was the inspector, who knew my work from Cold Creek, asked me to take over the school. It was about 30 miles from Fernie on the, on the American border. Quite an experience. [laughter] And the next year I was still at university finishing my undergraduate degree I got a job up at, for 3 months—2 months actually, May and June, Fort St John. And I taught French up there. That was, that was quite an experience.

HR: Fort St. John, goodness.

DL: That was, that was a frontier town in those days. The Americans had just left after building the Alaska highway. It was a rough and ready town, the kind you'd see in a film. [laughter]

HR: Oh wow.

DL: But anyway, I enjoyed it very much. I liked the all the experiences, some lovely people those.

HR: And did you teach, did you teach elementary or high school?

DL: No that I taught high school. That was—oh wait both—no wait just a minute it was both. I had a Grade 8 class, and I taught French and biology in high school Grade, Grade—taught biology. I had taken zoology as well, so I taught both elementary and high school. Of all things I taught physical education. [laughter] And I am, I'm the least capable—I've no athletic, athletic ability at all.

HR: So when, when you went up for May and June is it that they were short of teachers?

DL: Well an second instance here, the teacher let—didn't wanna teach, gave up I mean. There were always teachers that were, were—gave up the ghost in about the beginning of May, so I took over a teacher there. Then the third year of my undergraduate I also got a job for May and June at Coquitlam. In high school, teaching high school there for 2, for 2 months, May and June. The teacher there was a communist and they got rid of him. [laughter]

HR: Oh my goodness.

DL: Isn't it strange? I enjoyed that very much, too. Now I didn't teach French there though I had to teach, of all things, mathematics which I'm the least ma—no, no talent for mathematics. But I taught English and history. History was all right and I always loved history. So my experiences were rather varied, you know. [laughter]

HR: Extremely varied.

DL: Yeah, well then anyway, I went and finished my de—undergraduate degree and I then, as I say, I, I taught high school for a year in Cranbrook. And with the money I saved I went to Toronto. Now in Toronto when I—yeah. While doing my graduate degree I went up—wonderful experience. I got a job up on the Halfway on the Peace River, the Halfway River which is a tributary of the Peace. A day's horseback ride up the Alaska highway, at mile 90. And the first year I went up there they took me up there by helicopter, no other way of getting up there. It was a reservation, a Native reservation where they—well not a log—well it was a log cabin, four room log cabin. Quite, quite ample room as such. But it was—that was quite an experience. There I was all alone on this—now the reservation, the Indians came only in the summer, I may have mentioned this to you, and lived in teepees. During the winter they hunted and lived in log cabins some miles away from there. But they had to come on the reserve in order to get the family allowance for the children.

HR: I see. What, what year would that have been?

DL: That was 19—that would be about 1952 I guess, eh. Yeah, it's 1952 I think.

HR: Do you remember their, their home reserve? What—where they were from?



DL: No I don't know. It was some distance from there. I never did get to see where they had their little log cabins where they lived in the winter and so on and autumn. Because they come to this reserve, the the actual reservation in the summer.

HR: What was the closest town, was...

DL: Oh, it—well Fort St. John, closest town. That would be about mile 90. It was, as I say, a day's horseback ride. Second time I went up—I went up a second year. I went up there one season and then I went up the second time. First time I, I, I went over by helicopter. The second time I went over by horseback. A guide came up to get me from Fort St John and, you know, we had to cross a flooded river and I was scared silly because I can't swim! [laughter]

HR: Oh my goodness!

DL: But anyway, I could have written—I often thought about writing a novel on, on those experiences. But I lived there with these—my Natives. I had 16 children, was a one room school. Loveable children, I loved them very much, they were they were darlings. They were, they were not mischievous, well they were mischievous after a point, but they were easily disciplined, you know, easily disciplined. But the fi—the thing is the first day I got up there I was scared silly. I landed in the helicopter and there was a lady there from—a rancher's wife from up the trail who had been doing some sort of teaching there, I guess, well at some time. And she left—took, she took her gun and went and left and there I was all alone with—on an Indian encampment. I'd hardly ever seen any any Natives, you know, in my life and I was quite nervous. So the next morning I—anyway, I woke up, you know, rang the bell, nobody came to the school. I thought, "Oh my, oh my, oh my." I rang the bell again and I went, like—went, walked over to the encampment where all the teepees were, the tents were. And I rang again and I called out to the children to come out that I had chewing gum. My sister, my dear sister before I left had given me a whole pack—several packets of, of, of chewing gum fortunately. And so slowly my little Indians, I'm still calling them Indians I shouldn't call them Indians, I know, but these darling little children came out one by one in their moccasins slowly. Slowly pass by and I gave each one a chewing gum and they went to the school. And that was it. And that was it from then on all went well.

HR: Oh my goodness!

DL: All went well, and I, I liked them very much. I had no problems they were, they were, intelligence wise, you know, they were (inaudible) the other children I taught in rural schools and I had taught in rural schools so I knew how to handle the situation, you know, in rural schools. Six grades, you know, teaching them all at once. There's a lot of work, you know, it means...

HR: What ages, what ages were they?

DL: It means, you know, getting your seat work on early in the morning so you can get one—four classes or five classes busy while you teach Grade 1. Start with Grade 1 reading and make sure the others have seat work, and so on. Well I came to some amazing conclusions, you know, about rural schools. I think they were wonderful places. I think kids learned a great deal. They learned a kinda wonderful discipline. They tau—learned to teach each other and there is much, much to be said about the benefits of those rural schools that have now totally disappeared haven't they?

HR: Yes, yeah.

DL: Yeah.

HR: How old were the children?

DL: How old were they? Well, Grade 1 to Grade 6. They'd had some education because they had some people come in and out from that school. It was a seasonal school meaning from April until supposedly July, but they had apparently had a young high school teacher there the year before doing, doing some teaching probably during that sea, that seasonal period, you see. So I, you know, I don't think they had much teaching to begin with, I don't think so.

HR: And so did you do the curriculum with them then?

DL: Oh yes, yes, I followed the curriculum with them, you know. But I had to adapt it up to a point. The children were bright. There was some very bright children. There were a couple that were not, but the usual range of intelligence of any other class. One little boy was a brilliant little boy, I thought. Oh! He was just a darling—intelligent. There was, was a big girl there she was about 16, she was the oldest. She, she was quite backwards. Perhaps she was a little, yeah, backwards, there was no question about it. And there was one boy, an older boy, quite bright, who was sort of the leader of the group. If I had to give a message, he would—see some of the children didn't understand the English that well. He would, more or less, be my interpreter, so to speak. But in any case, the progress they made was amazing.

HR: And did you have adequate resources?

DL: I'm sorry?

HR: Did you have adequate resources?

DL: Well now, yeah. The readers—we had the usual readers, you know, Mary and Jane which is, you know, ridiculous in that situation anyway. But they learned how to read with them. My Grade 1s were very good. I had what, three Grade 1s I think and they immediately began to read very well and it was interesting how I had to try and make use of their own background in many ways. Now it was a, presumably, a Catholic school. It was—I taught also some religion to them, of course. And

that was interesting too because they had been—missionaries had been up there, but the missionary never came around. But one day he did come. A wonderful Belgian—no a (inaudible) man, very bright. He came and the only reason he came was the government had to legalize many of these marriages that had never been legalized, so they flew him in by helicopter. So he spent 2 days with me and it was quite interesting. I'd—I was godfather for I don't know how many children for baptisms and how many best man for I don't know how many legalized weddings. [laughter]

HR: Oh lovely.

DL: It was a wonderful experience. But they, they learned things very—as quickly as any children, children I had in other rural schools. Now for instance I wanted to learn as much as I could of their language which was not easy because I didn't mix with, particularly with the adults. The adults were in their encampment about 2 miles—well a mile, a mile away, perhaps not even, a half a mile probably. There was a bit—they would come around my cabin, the men, and they'd come in and I'd give them all a cup of tea. And I was also responsible, you see, to give out medicine. That was part of my job as well. And they always had colds. So they were always coming in for cough medicine. But sometimes I got the impression they were coming in a little too frequently for cough medicine.

HR: [laughter]

DL: And then I found out why. You see, alcohol was not permitted on the on the reserve, by no means, and they knew it. So they would come in, apparently, with aspirin and, and—ask for aspirin because the—they and came for aspirins and cough medicine. The cough m—with the aspirin they could put in cough—I think some aspirin in coke they can get a little tipsy on that. [laughter] You know that? I didn't know that.

HR: I didn't know that.

DL: Yeah, now I don't know—I think—much of a problem of alcohol on the whole. The, the adults treated me very well. They kept their place, their place, that is. The men came around and I'd give them all a cup of tea. They spoke very little very little, very little.

HR: What was, what was their language, do you know?

DL: Yeah, these were the Beaver—they were the Beaver tribe so the language was Beaver. Now I didn't speak it at all but the missionary who came, this Father Yunk, who was a brilliant man. He, he spoke their language when he came in. I did not. They spoke English, at least the the men did, did, the women I don't think did particularly. But anyway, I, I, I tried to mention on one occasion—I thought well—I got them to, to translate the “Our Father” in their language. I tried to listen as carefully as possible to their language, this older boy especially helped me. And I wrote on the board in English—sound at least the Our, the “Our Father” in Indian—in the Beaver language. It's very interesting, very interesting. But I, I, I thought that by doing that I might, you know, get—make

them aware that I was sympathetic to both their language and to their ways. I, I—and I think they appreciated that. It rained a great deal one summer when I was out there and the tom toms would go on for a good part of the night. I guess they were invoking the, the rain spirits, I don't know. But I remember one little boy coming up to me and he says, "You come, we have church tonight, we have church," meaning, I think, they were having a session with their tom toms dancing, I presume. I never did get out, out to their, to their encampment. I just didn't want to—felt I was going, perhaps, out of my way. But I always welcomed them in the house and they knew they were welcome. And as I say, I gave out the medicine so they were always there for cough medicine and what not. But with the children now—very interesting, this you'll find interesting. The poor little ki—youngsters, as sweet as they were, were about as dirty as you could imagine. Nobody ever did much laun—that's some of the families were quite good and the children were fairly clean. But in some cases where the children had lost their mothers—one little boy had lost his parents, was living with an old aunt. I mean, they were just filthy, they never bathed, of course. But—so I decided I should do something about that, [cough] pardon me. So I had made a big room in my house, my cabin there—an extra room. So on a couple of occasions I had the boys bathe and that was a very good idea, I think, because the girls I couldn't do much except sprinkle anti-pest powder on them because they were full of lice, as you imagine, there hair was just full of, of lice and so on. But we would wash in the morning, we had of course a wash pan, you know, played doctor and nurse. I—there was no water we—I had to go for the water in a little creek near by, get my own water. But the children were, as I say, on the whole very well disciplined there's no, there's no great problem with them, but they'd smell. Really the smell was impossible, smelled smoke because obviously their enclosure's full—filled with smoke from the teepees, I guess, and of course they never bathed and so the smell in the school at times was suffocating. I got used to it toward the end, I guess, I guess, but it—that was the hard part of it, you know. A second great difficulty was—another thing, there was terrible biting flies and mosquitoes of the North. So I couldn't go for a walk. I had to put—and there was—there weren't many lotions, anti-mosquito lotions, in those days. There was some type of oil which didn't help very much, so I could hardly—well I would go for a walk but it was a painful experience some times. But in any case, as I say, I managed to get the kids to wash at least in the morning, at least their hands and their face and so on and, and as I say I, I had a disinfectant powder as well. Now something else very interesting, I found, second year I was up there they had built these—the Indian agent, and I have more to say about him, I disliked him immensely. He came around once or twice and to pay the treaty money. The man had no love or respect for these, for these, these Native people. I could see that and it got on my nerves I almost could have killed him one day when he came. But anyway—but he had a fire guard built around the school—the cabin, my cabin. My—yeah.

HR: What, what is a fire guard?

DL: Well it's a—what they do is, say, plough around and have an area which they'd plough sort of a circle around the buildings where they'd, they'd take the vegetation away in case of a fire. It'd stop the fire. It's, it's a kind of a fire guard, I guess.

HR: Okay.

DL: It was bush country and, and in one, in fact one summer, I got very scared. There was a fire nearby and the whole area was full of smoke. I was rather—I was terrified and thought, “Oh my we’re going to have one of those fires that sweep along the valley, you know,” and fortunately nothing happened. But anyway, when I got the idea with this fire guard that had been ploughed, I thought, “Well let’s have a garden.” So, I thought, you know, “I’m sure these children didn’t get much in the way of vegetables.” All they ate was probably dried meat—deer and elk meat because all they did, these Natives, was hunt in the winter and the fall and dry the meat and that’s what they lived on. And they did get, of course, some money from the family allowance and—but anyway we planted, we had a garden. I love gardening I’m—I love gardening. Each little child had his patch, lettuce and carrots and what not. And since the days are long, very long, it’s daylight till 11:00. Well by the beginning of July we had a—we had crops. We had lettuce, we had carrots and all the women would come up and help themselves. But nobody got the idea of doing that themselves. I hoped maybe when I—after I’d left I thought, “Well maybe they’d get the idea, the idea will catch on and they will continue with the gardening.” I don’t know. I rather doubt that they did, I don’t know. But anyway, it was quite something to see these kids in the garden planting.

HR: Where, where did you get the seeds?

DL: Oh well I got all this from, from, from Fort St. John. The Indian agent would send that out to me, you see, because he would send out various things. He would send out medicines and what not and so on. And everything came in by hor—on horseback, as a rule. There were ranchers, you, see around. Maybe the closest ranch was about 5 miles, I guess. And they would alw—they were going into town off, off and on and pass by my house and so they would bring me things that I might need. They might even got me some groceries and things that the Indian agent would have. So that was, that was a real good, good thing because otherwise I would be very very isolated. Now mind you the (inaudible) were very nice too. They were mostly people who had started on ranching up there. So they were pioneers really in a real sense. They were very hospitable when I saw them on rare occasions. So I, I didn’t see very many people at all. But that second year too was rather interesting because the war, the world war over but there was another war that was on when I was up there. That was the Korean War, remember that we were on.

HR: Yes.

DL: Yeah and I remember one day one of the ranchers was passing by and said, “By the way,” he said, “the Korean war is over.” So I found that out. I did have actually a little radio. It was—I, I didn’t get—reception wasn’t particularly good, but I did have a little radio which was a great help. Mind you and I also I had—quite busy at night, I was doing graduate work. So one day a horse arrived with a whole bag of books. They were books that the University of Toronto sent me. I had—doing my thesis you see, I was working on my thesis as well. So I had this big bag of books arrived from the University of Toronto.

HR: Oh, goodness.

DL: [laughter] Which I was delighted. But, I—they were very, very good. But they arrived safe and sound anyway, so I had them to work with at night.

HR: And were you able to get them back home again after that?

DL: Oh yes, oh yes I'd brought them back with me when I went back, yes, that was no great problem, you know. But, I thought how wonderful, you know, that the University of Toronto would be so gracious as to allow all—I had these volumes on, on this particular French author that I was working on.

HR: Ah.

DL: Yeah, I was very, very happy about that. But I, I kept in touch with the world because I did have the little, little radio there and found what was going on at that time. So it wasn't that I got feeling that isolated. Although I saw white men very seldom. And there wasn't much conversation, of course, but the company of the children was lovely. I must say, the children I did enjoy. Life was busy, I mean, there's no question that I—when you're teaching in a rural school, and you have six class—six grades, and you want to keep them busy it's, it's a full day, it's a full day. Rural school teachers certainly earned their money, no question of that.

HR: Mm.

DL: But still the satisfaction, you know, was enormous, was enormous. Oh there's no question about that. And then at the end of the term there, I may have told you this perhaps, the Department of Indian Affairs—oh yes something else I wanted to tell you. I would also teach on Saturdays. The Indian agent suggested it because they have so little schooling on the season is just, you know, end of April, May, and June, July, that perhaps I could teach on Saturdays which would render a little more money for me as well. So I did that as well. I'd come to school on Saturdays and I don't think they minded, particularly they—I got the impression that they enjoyed school. It was something they enjoyed. The enthusiasm of those little children was really infectious, it really was. And I'd go for little hikes as well. They were like little, little bears. It was just a delight, absolute delight to see them. And I must say their, their—I could see in no time how their English improved. Now many things I could do—was one, music, they loved singing. Oh how they loved singing. I taught them nursery rhymes, especially and they loved stories and I told them nursery stories. I like storytelling, I always loved story telling, telling stories. And the story tell—the stories I told, my children when I taught in other rural schools those same stories you know that I grew up with. They loved them. And often times, I would hear them singing some of these songs that I'd taught them. They'd be out on—out in the coun—I'd see them singing them, you know, riding by on their horses. They loved singing, very much. One thing I found they couldn't do very well—I used to give them physical education. Now they were marvellous at climbing hills, the little hills around there like little bears.

But, they were almost—some of them were a little on the clumsy side when it came to doing formal exercises, rather interesting I thought. They were agile but perhaps typical of all children, I don't know. But I noted that. But they loved games, they loved to play games. And as I say, they loved music, they loved music very, very, oh very much. But anyway at the end—oh something now about their lifestyle. They lived in teepees, as I say, and some families were very stable I noticed, the fathers would come to me. But some of the children, honestly, were—bad days, seemed to be neglected. Rather badly neglected and that broke my heart, there was not that much I could do. But again I repeat, as far as intelligence and, and enthusiasm is concerned, oh no, I could never complain. They were, if anything, better than the ones I had in the other rural school that I had taught. If I had to discipline them they had no resentment particularly, no resentment at all. Now to, to what extent the adults appreciated me, I don't know. I think they did, because I came back a second time and apparently they were surprised I came back a second season. So they asked me for a report. The department of Indian affairs asked me to make a report. And as I may have told you, I did it. And I spent quite a bit of time on it. I did it in sort of graduate school style and told them a number of things that I felt were simply almost ludicrous, teaching these people in this particular situation. Harry—“Dick and Jane” were nonsense, father picks up the phone to phone mother at the office sort of thing. I mean, come on, that doesn't mean anything at all to these children. But I tried to adapt, use their world as much as possible in my teaching. And I hope I succeeded to some extent.

HR: Can you give me an example of, of how you might have adapted some of that? What, what did you do?

DL: Well yes I will, one. I knew that—now teaching them arithmetic and the tables, like to learn the times table and so on and so on. But I said to the children one day, I said, “Now when you go up to the”—there was a, a trading post some miles up the Alaska highway where the Indians did their buying. And I said, now I said, “If you don't want to be cheated by the white man”—I think probably there was times when they were—“you got to learn your, your, your arithmetic so you can count the money.” And I think that impressed them, that impressed them I think very much. Because I had a feeling that probably sometimes they were taken advantage of, you know. And then to—what—I didn't have much of a library, unfortunately, you know. That was too bad. But I did have a little record player, played little little wee records. And this they loved very much. Little rhymes, you know, little nursery rhymes. This they, they formed little queues and they like them very much. Fortunately, I had that. So I, I wasn't devoid of all equipment but that was about my—oh about the only thing I had, I guess. And the, the—but the library was rather scarce, there wasn't too much in the way of choice, as far as the library was concerned. But there I thought they made good progress in their reading. That, that I thought was very, very good, very very, very good.

HR: And was the library in the school, or was it farther?

DL: No, there was no, there was no library to speak of. There may have been a few books...

HR: Books.

DL: ...left over from somewhere. I can't quite remember if there were that many at all, any at all. Let me see there—we had the readers, we had the readers of course. And I had some of my own, I guess. I probably brought some of my own up. I don't remember any books now that I think of it. If they could, you know, go and just read through. I don't think we did.

HR: So the, the school itself was separate from your cabin?

DL: No no. Very much so yes, I—my cabin was a four room house really. It was, well, you know, it was substantial.

HR: Ah.

DL: And then there was the school too which was well built. You know, stove in the middle, of course, central like many rural schools. And it—nothing to complain about as far as the school room itself was concerned, I guess. I had to keep it clean myself, of course. I had to do the, the janitor work, cleaning it and keeping it clean, but...

HR: So they had been built by the mission—by the Catholic mission?

DL: No, no I don't think so, it was much more recent.

HR: Ah.

DL: No I don't think so, no I don't think so. No, I think not.

HR: Probably the federal government then?

DL: I think it was federal government.

HR: Okay.

DL: Department of Indian Affairs at that time, yeah.

HR: Okay.

DL: It was a well built school from that point of view. Oh no, I've nothing to complain there. And the same with my house. I had a living room and there was some, you know, substantial furniture and the kitchen too was quite well provided. Now, of course, I had to chop my own wood and get my own water, of course, and so on. But that's all right, that was fine, that was fine. But anyway, at the end of the year, as I say, I made this report which, I guess, they were rather pleased about, I don't know. And I got an interesting letter asking me if I would consider being inspector for these seasonal



schools for the whole of Canada. And I thought, “Oh geez, that’s not what I had in mind particularly I...”

HR: Oh wow.

DL: I, I, I find, I think, teaching in the classroom much more interesting than running around inspecting schools who—not quite my thing. But anyway I, of course, I had—I was finishing off my PhD. So I had made another choice. But I went back, as I say, a second year, a second season. And I probably would have gone back a third, if I, if I had had been able to.

HR: Mm-hmm.

DL: It was in a way—I won’t say it was a lo—well it was a bit of a lonely experience. I saw a white man very seldom. And there wasn’t much conversation with my my, my Native friends. But the children were great company. You know, one is never lonely when one has children around oneself.

HR: Right. Well, that’s right.

DL: Pardon?

HR: That, that’s for sure, yes. Children always keep interesting.

DL: Very, very much so. I don’t have any grandchildren. I regret that so much, so much. And I never lonely when you have youngsters around. But anyway, those were my notes. I don’t know if I’ve missed anything I wanted to tell you. But maybe you have a few questions now?

HR: I do. How do you feel? Do you feel like going on?

DL: Fine, oh please go on, go on.

HR: Okay.

DL: Ask me.

HR: Maybe we could just return to your experiences at Coal Creek?

DL: Oh yes, sure, sure.

HR: And um.

DL: Well it was, as I say, it was the last year the school was open because they—after I left they closed the school and they closed the town. Few people remaining in the town moved out and the, the children—yeah, and the children of course went to Fernie. The school was in Fernie.

HR: I see.

DL: Yeah, it was the last—the end. It happens with many of those coal mines.

HR: Yes.

DL: Coal mining towns, you know. They there are many of the around Fernie there that were prosperous mining towns and then suddenly they disappeared from the map entirely.

HR: Right, right.

DL: Mm-hmm.

HR: So during this time, both during the months that you did your practice teaching and then again after the war, what do you remember about it? Could you—do you remember that it was any different from your experiences after the war? Or was the, was the.

DL: Well I didn't teach—the things is I didn't teach, of course, that much, you know, during the war itself in the elementary, on the on the elementary level because the war was over in '45 and I—that's the year I started teaching.

HR: Mm-hmm.

DL: I, I got at the tail end of the war, so to speak. Oh, the Korean war was on, of course, sometime later on in the '50s and so on.

HR: Do you remember the, the war having an impact at all on, on that school? Were there?

DL: No, not particularly, no. No, I don't think we were ever probably much aware of that. Well let's put it this way, the children were from a small town. Well one interesting little story there. One of the boy—not one of my students, but a boy from that town used to go to Fernie for high school during the war, but from Coal Creek. And I remember that he, he was killed, of course, in the war, I guess. The war was so apparent to the (inaudible) because the boy was from Coal Creek actually, he used to go to high school in Fernie and go up and down every day, I guess. But the war, as such, I don't remember it being of any significance because this was the end of the war, the end of the war, actually.

HR: How many children did you have at that school?

DL: At Coal Creek I had I think between 16 and 18, about the same number I that had up at my little Native school on the Halfway River. About 16, yeah, and the six grades, six grades. And the interesting thing is that the six grades, but their level, levels were different even in the lower grade. So—but the point is I often had the older students help the younger students. This, this, this worked out very, very well, very, very well.

HR: And did you have enough resources in order for the children to do their, their curriculum?

DL: Yes, the textbooks were there. We had sufficient textbooks, resources. I brought a lot of things myself and so I decorated the classroom with pictures and spent a lot of time decorating the classroom with pictures, illustrated materials. I, I got them—I brought them with me, you know, so the classroom looked rather—it looked very well, it looked very well.

HR: So those illustrated materials, you, you drew them or did you?

DL: No this was just a, a chart of various kinds. For instance, I remember I got some, some health charts from the Department of Health.

HR: Ah.

DL: On what to eat, you know, and what not, very colourful. And then I had various pictures that I'd cut out or and from various places.

HR: Magazines?

DL: Yeah, yeah, and put them on the walls and I would change them as well. I know when I was in, in Coal Creek the, the inspector liked them very much. Liked the way the classroom had been decorated. He liked that very much. They spent a lot of time—well I, I like for my own space as well—up, up at Fort St. John. As I say, we, we had adequate—well not so much adequate resources, but the classroom itself was was, was, was quite good, it was quite good. It was quite a well built classroom. I just wasn't sure how much good teaching they had before I came there, I don't think they did.

HR: In the, in the situation at Coal Creek.

DL: Yes.

HR: Can you, can you give me a sort of typical day in the life at Coal Creek? What, what would you do with all those children of different ages and different?

DL: Oh yes, well that is a, a eternal problem with the rural school is—you start off, for instance if I remember now correctly, I would start off putting seat board—work on the board which would be

their seat work. And I'd start off te—the reading lesson with—reading lesson with the Grade 1s. I started off with them. Then I'd go to the twos who were doing some sort of work, trying to think now, just typical questions I'd put on the board. I'm trying to think—they were based on their reading perhaps, you see, based on their reading. And then I would do their, their Grade 2 reading, probably Grade 3. Anyway I'd finally get mid, mid, mid morning we'd have break, obviously. Then we'd have writing lesson, they could do that together. Later on we could have a singing lesson, we could have maybe a little, have a little science lesson they'd all participate in more or less. And then arithmetic, of course, I had to do that to—in separate classes. Keep one group busy doing some arithmetic while I was teaching one class the new lesson that day of arithmetic. That, that was no problem, really, the question was inventing, you know, seat work for them. But, but that, that, that wasn't—that could be done. I started to be a little more inventive. Make sure that they were always busy, and they always were. If they finished early then I'd have to be sure to have some—I may have had some library books where they could go to. I'm trying to remember now, up at Cold Creek we had some books. But, at, at up at my reservation I don't think I had very many library books. But at Cold creek we did. We had some old readers I remember that. We had some old readers, old set of readers at Cold Creek and we used those as well. Cold Creek was a little better, a little better off with books as such. But somehow the day would go by very quickly. It was amazing.

HR: So with—when it was things like singing, music, or, or physical education you did that with all the kids?

DL: Yep, we did it all together, yes we did. You did quite a bit that—they were all interested in the music and, of course, you could—we did take writing lesson I remember. Did writing penmanship at that time, we always had that. That was no problem. But I don't remember really, you know, being very concerned about their not being busy. I was always happy when some of my students finished their work early because then I would send them over perhaps to help with the Grade 1 student with his reading. I could do that, because I had a boy from Grade 6 go over. Finished his seat work, I'd say, "Would you go over now to help little Johnny and, and reading with his reader." Now I think they enjoyed that, they enjoyed that.

HR: And what about the physical make up of the school? Can you remember what shape it was in?

DL: The what? The?

HR: The physical structure.

DL: Oh, well in Coal Creek there was—there had been—the (inaudible) High School there was three rooms. Only the one was used now and the rest er were not used, of course. There was just the one—I took the one room. It was quite adequate, it was well built school in many ways. And the one, my Native school, up also was—it was logs. It was made of logs, yes it was. But it was quite large; it was quite ample room wise with good windows, good light, and in the summer I didn't have to worry about heat particularly because we had—it was summer. In Coal creek there was always a

woman who had the fire on for me. That was very nice. I got there, got off my little train, coal miners train, and there'd been a lady who was assigned to start the fire in the, in the, the stove which heated our, our, our room. So, that, that was fine I didn't have to worry.

HR: That was someone, that was someone from the community?

DL: Somebody from the community, yes. So, I didn't have to worry about that, that was very, very good, very good. But this mining community was very interesting because it was—a number of, a good number of students there were of English stock. They were actually people—the parents were originally from Timberland, Lancashire, you know, coal miners from England.

HR: Mm.

DL: They came over I guess to Cold Creek and they came with their accent, you know. And the children kept their, now after almost a generation, a few had kept that accent because they were isolated. In any case, somewhat isolated in this small mining town and so they kept their Lancashire accent. So I remember I thought one project I'm going to do— I'm going to see if I can get rid of their—have them pronounce their “h's”. So we would practice, “Harry had his hat on.” We did that off and on throughout the year. By the end of the year I'm sure that they'll all know. At the end of the year we had a little test. And it simply was, “Arry ad is at on.” [laughter]

HR: [laughter] It was strongly embedded in there wasn't it?

DL: Oh yes. So I thought I wasn't very successful. I think now they are all grown-up, these people are all in their 50s and 60s, no more now. And I've met some of them in the last several years and I didn't—I think they've lost their “h's.” [laughter]

HR: My.

DL: Yes, but that was a particular problem there, as well. It had been a very tragic community. And even when I was in Coal Creek for instance, we had an occasion where the school began to shake and we knew that we had what we called a, “a hump,” I think it's called hump in the mind. That is we had—there would be a coal miner cave-in in the mines. And you could feel the tremor in the school itself, and sure enough somebody had been hurt. There had been a mine disaster. So, the community always lived with that danger above them, you know. Of living in a coal mining town is a, a terrible experience in many ways, from that point of view. So that was there too, to some extent.

HR: Did, did anyone die while you were there? Did...

DL: No, no, no, but what the little boy—when the little boy that I taught in Grade 1—bright little fella, darling little fella—I taught him in Grade 1, I taught him to read in Grade 1. Several years later I heard that he had been killed while working in the mines.

HR: Oh.

DL: Yes, so it's a tragedy that sits very, very close. Very, very close. But it was a coal mining town, many of these were of English extraction, these, these people. And, and as I say, I tried to get rid of their "Hs" but I never did. But they were—very interesting you know in comparing that school with the one up north, my Native children. You know, I would say that discipline and enthusiasm was much greater with my Native children than my children from Coal Creek. Much more I think so. The behaviour of my little Native children was certainly much higher, much better quality there is no question. I could—I would scold them too.

[continued]

DL: ...These of my children in Coal Creek. Mind you, the community itself—coal mining communities have a tough quality about it, as you might well imagine, you know, coal mining community. That Fernie itself was a coal mining community. And certainly the Fernie schools had more than their share of discipline troubles. But not that the children gave me any major problems of discipline no, no, no. In high school that's another story. When I taught the 1 year in high school there were some rather grim problems. But everybody has them in high school, now worse than ever. But...

HR: Did you ever have to strap anyone?

DL: Not really. In Coal Creek no, no I never used the strap, I never did. I scolded a few times. Now I had to be very severe with one little boy, and it broke my heart up in my Native school. But one boy, his mom was dead, he was living with his old grandmother. He was just wearing a filthy shirt and pants. And he stopped coming—he wouldn't come to school. He just wouldn't come. I had to realize that he had to come and I had to—I used a—perhaps I better have a little severity here. I'm not going to get anywhere by being, being soft on him. So I got rather hard on him one day for his own sake. He had to come to school there was no question. And he responded, oh he responded, he did. But the other children were docile. I would say that my Indian children were much docile than my ones in Coal Creek. The ones in Cold creek were very nice too, but their, their parents were not. Some of these, some of these women from Lancashire [laughter] could be pretty sharp, believe me. About the end of the year when I, I had to fail a couple of them in Coal Creek, I mean, there was no question. We don't fail anymore I presume, I don't know what the situation is. But in those days we did. I mean, a couple of them were very poor. I felt they should repeat the year, I felt. The mother came up and I thought she was going to kill me. [laughter] But in my little Indian friends, my little Native children, no. There was a gentleness there that I shall always remember, always remember. Now my stu—when I taught in that Newgate school that was a problem. I taught that when I was an undergrad for two months, May and June. The teacher there had not been much of a success. She got out, I'm not sure quite sure the reasons, but.

HR: And what, what year was that?

DL: That would be 19—oh, let me see that must have been—I was doing—finishing my—it must have been 1947 probably. On my third or fourth year at university. The children there—of course, there had been no discipline at all. I mean they were getting away with murder with the teacher who, who that they had. And trying to get them disciplined and get them organized was—and I could sense their hostility, very much so. And I think even some of the local people were a bit hostile, because they didn't like to see a teacher replaced as such. But anyway, by the end of June things were okay. I—at the end of June I got them round discipline, got them, got them to work. The most difficult school I had, I was teaching Grade 8 up at Fort St. John, those 2 months I taught at Fort St. John. I asked to be the homeroom teacher of a Grade 8 class. And there were a number of very difficult boys there. One of them had been in a reform school. And I shall never forget he was going to try me out. And he sat in the front seat. And when I first walked into there, this is, you know, beginning of May, I guess, he let his package of cigarettes drop in front of me. Just to show off that he was a man. So, I [laughter] I do have a Latin temper, if I use it. So, I just blew up. And I said, "Now you go back and sit in that back seat, the back seat of that the room here. And don't you ever open your mouth or say anything in this class as long as I am here."

HR: Wow.

DL: Well he did, he did. But anyway, one day one I was teaching, believe it or not, I was teaching music there as well, although I didn't know much about music. But I was talking about things, talking about Gilbert and Sullivan. I guess telling them a story about Gilbert and Sullivan operetta of all things.

HR: [laughter]

DL: And this, this little Métis boy, half (inaudible). A difficult boy, very difficult. Put his hand up and I thought well he hadn't spoken for weeks and then he—I thought, "Maybe it was something important to say," so I said, "yes?" He put up his hand and he said, "Sir, when I was in Vancouver we went to see a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta." I thought, "Oh okay, okay." [laughter] Fine, maybe we both learned a lesson.

HR: [laughter]

DL: But that was Grade 8t. The ones I liked, you know, Helen, were the Grade 3s. Now something else I wanted to tell you that might be of interest to you. While I was teaching here at, at Queen's University College people would, this was quite a few years ago, they would talk about setting up French in grade— here in Lon, London here, on the elementary level. There was a great deal of controversy. But anyway, I was asked if I would, by some parents, some well to do parents in the neighbourhood, if I would give private lessons in the school in the local school after school. So I had a group of about probably—I had a smaller group. And anyway after a year or two it grew and I got some faculty from the university and some of my honour students so we would go over to Ryerson Public School here. It was just down the street, and we would teach between 3:30 til 4:00 or

something, twice a week. It was very successful, very successful. Now they started teaching French on the elementary level a few years later. They started at the wrong end, they started at the Grade 9 level instead of the the Grade 1 level.

HR: Oh.

DL: And I told them they were foolish to do that, but nobody listened.

HR: Oh.

DL: Anyway, so I taught. I always had a Grade 3 class, I was more or less the supervisor of the program. But, I, I had a Grade 3 class. I loved Grade 3. And then the same thing with Italian. They started Italian at local school and I taught on Saturday morning. I taught a class with a few other people. We taught Italian as well. And again I chose a Grade 3. I would always say to my friends, "Well maybe I should have stayed with Grade 3." [laughter]

HR: And was that, was that through the school district or...

DL: Well no these were private things, private that parents had organized.

HR: Parents did, okay.

DL: Yeah parents had organized. No the pro—the French program now is a big program. Everybody wants their children wants their children to go to these, to these—they have a good number now of bilingual schools here in London. Both on the elementary and high school level, it's a big thing right now. Everybody boasting that their child takes French. [laughter]

HR: Yeah, well yes it became very popular.

DL: Oh it became very popular or very chic to have your children go to a French speaking school. [laughter] But I did enjoy the Grade 3s I must say. I probably would have been quite happy to do—you know my life, but I enjoyed it very very much. But there were very few materials at that time. There were no materials first of all, teaching Grade 3 French, and even less for Italian. In fact I translated a little primer into Italian and made my own copies for my little Grade 3 class, actually.

HR: Oh wow.

DL: Yeah. But, I think it moved on since then. But I doubt—see if I've moved on to, I'm not sure. [laughter] But as I was saying, Helen, was there anything else I could—that you might want to?

HR: No, we've been speaking now for an hour and 10 minutes.