

Gwen Miller Interview – January 14, 2008

HR – Helen Raptis (interviewer)

GM – Gwen Miller (interviewee)

HR: This is an interview with Gwen Miller on January 14th, 2008. Maybe you can just begin my telling me—actually before the teaching can you just give me an idea of, of where you born and where you were raised, Gwen?

GM: I was born in Winnipeg in 1916. My family at the time were living in a place called Lucerne, B.C. up in the Rocky Mountains between Blue River and Jasper and we were there until we moved to Saskatchewan. My dad was a railroad engineer and we lived in Saskatchewan until 1927 when we moved to Kamloops. And I went to, to the Stuart Wood here school first and then to a junior high and high school up to Grade 13. And then I went to Vancouver Normal School for 1 year and my teaching began in Lytton in 1936 in a two room school. And I arrived in Lytton late one night and found out that the two room school wasn't complete. So I had to teach for—until Christmas in a community hall. And that was 1936 to 1941.

HR: So were you in the—at the Normal School '35-'36?

GM: Yes.

HR: And if I can just back up a tiny little bit here, when you went to high school in Kamloops which high school was it?

GM: It was called Kamloops High School.

HR: Okay.

GM: Not Kam High as it is now. But Kamloops High School.

HR: And do you recall any teachers that inspired you or anyone that you went to school with that would have helped you to shape your decision going into teaching or...

GM: I don't know. I think I always wanted to be a school teacher. In fact we used to play school and one time I went into the neighbours to tell them that I was going to teach school. I was going to go to normal school rather, to learn how to be a teacher and this man said, "I could tell them you know how to teach. You have taught school in my kitchen for many days." [laughter]

HR: So you used to do that with the kids?

GM. That was in Kamloops just before I went to normal school.

HR: So was this with your friends or with younger children?

GM: Just with my friend.

HR: Oh I see. So you were a born teacher.

GM: Oh yes, I wanted to do that.

HR: Oh that's nice to know.

GM: Yeah.

HR: So do you recall anything about your high school days that, that helped you to become a teacher or were your teachers not very memorable?

GM: Well I remember there, there, there were sisters, Miss Reid, sisters. One was math and the other was English. I don't know if any of them were an inspiration to me to be a teacher, but they were all very good teachers, excellent teachers. In fact Kamloops has had Rhodes scholars many times. So that's the teachers in Kamloops.

HR: Okay, and were you involved in anything when you were at high school, any kinds of activities or...

GM: Student council.

HR: Student council? What was your role?

GM: Oh I forget. That will be my answer.

HR: Okay, that's fine. So when you got your position at Lytton you were straight out of normal school and it was to be a two room school.

GM: Yes.

HR: And you taught in the community centre for the first 6 months did you...

GM: Yes. There were desks, moveable desks. In October when they started playing basketball we had to put the desks up on the stage every night.

HR: Oh goodness.

GM: And then take them down in the morning.

HR: What, what grades did you have Gwen?

GM: Grades 1 to 4.

HR: Do you remember much about those kids?

GM: I have a picture from the, now the Lytton Museum.

HR: Really?

GM: I have that picture and I have an article in that museum paper about that.

HR: Oh!

GM: And the names of all those children.

HR: Maybe you could give me that reference and I could read that article and...

GM: Yes.

HR: Is it, is it the Lytton Museum?

GM: The Lytton Museum and Archives and it's November, 2004.

HR: Okay.

GM: Issue five number three. I had the address somewhere but archives here.

HR: Okay I can find that if you can't find it. I could find it and I could write to them and to ask them for that.

GM: Well, I don't know if it is here—Lytton B.C. Box 549 V0K 1Z0.

HR: 1Z0, okay I will write to them.

GM: Yes.

HR: Thank you. Okay so...

HR: The article is entitled "School Time Pioneers."

HR: Okay.

GM: It will give you a little bit about me, about the first class of Grades 1 to 4; monthly salary \$80; annual salary \$800 a year; room and board at the Brophy House \$45 a month.

HR: Wow. That's half your salary, over half of your salary.

GM: Pardon?

HR: That's over half your salary.

GM: Well.

HR: Where did you board?

GM : I boarded at the Brophy House. There was a room and board and I had one room there.

HR: Was that a family that you boarded with?

GM: Yes, and the, the room in the front of the house was the post office.

HR: Oh.

GM: And the—one of the—well the lady that owned the house was the mother of a lady who had several cabins next door and their home was next door and inside they had a piano which they let me use on Saturday mornings to teach piano lessons.

HR: Oh, and were your—were some of the children from your class taking lessons with you?

GM: Yes.

HR: I see.

GM: One girl I remember her parents owned a hotel there. Speaking of that, the hotel people allowed me to use their lounge and have card parties once a week.

HR: Card parties?

GM: These card parties and charged admission, 25 cents a person. And we raised money to buy a piano for the school.

HR: And what was the nature of the card parties? What did you do?

GM: It was either whist or bridge.

HR: Oh I see. Did you get a large turn out?

GM: Well, very large. Student's council raised some money and I raised some money. And we got \$400. And the local merchants arranged for a second hand piano for \$400.

HR: Wow.

GM: Pardon?

HR: Wow! That, that's a, that's a great story. You don't hear stories like that.

GM: Also, the last time I was there that, that piano was still being used in one of the old school buildings.

HR: Oh, my goodness! That must have been a very solid piano.

GM: Yes, it was. Old. I don't think it was old because it was dark anyway, a dark colour.

HR: Okay.

GM: When I moved into the school, my mother made cretonne curtains for the windows because there were no blinds or anything on the windows. My mother made those.

HR: Can you tell me a little about the school, what did it look like and what was the name?

GM: Oh it was Lytton Superior School.

HR: Okay.

GM: And it was right next to where the old one room school had been.

HR: Oh I see.

GM: And later on, on the property above the—just slightly above that building was a larger elementary school was built there and then they had a separate high school which was on the main highway above the town.

HR: Oh I see. And with the—in the new school it was two rooms and was there a washroom? Were they connected?

GM: There were washrooms in the basement.

HR: In the basement?

GM: Boys on one side and girls on the other. Real, real washrooms, you know. And there was two classrooms and between the classrooms there was an entry way and there was one small room on the left which was—there was a sink in there and I was thinking about it last night. I think it was suppose to be a lab for any chemistry. And the other little room was the library. All one wall was for books and there was a table in there in case somebody had to go in there to do their studying.

HR: And did you have a stove or anything in the—or how did you heat there?

GM: The heat was in the basement. I don't remember too much about what kind of furnace it was but I presume that in those days there was wood and coal.

HR: You must have been lucky then to have a furnace, I think.

GM: Yes, yes. Well, at least I didn't have to stroke the furnace, or the fire.

HR: Was there a janitor or something that...

GM: Yes we had a Native man who lived on the reserve which was not very far from here—from there rather. He looked after cleaning of the rooms and the furnace.

HR: And the school district paid him, I guess?

GM: Yes, yeah.

HR: Okay. What do remember about teaching during this time? You said you stayed there from 1941 and then were you married in '41?

GM: Yes I married in 1941 and my husband joined the air-force in December. We left there in December and I was with him through all his career. We went to—well first of all Edmonton though it wasn't very long and Regina and I applied to—for substituting in Regina. And they said that I would have to sign the Oath of Allegiance and I said I had already done that in B.C. But that's alright we have to do it in, in Regina there and hire a lawyer to do it. But my husband was on ACQ pay so I couldn't afford that. But then when we moved to Yorkton, I was living in one room of a house and the man, the owner said "Well, I used to be on the school board and I'll get you a job substituting."

HR: Oh.

GM: Now this is sort of irrelevant. I remember very little about—it was a fun community Yorkton, Saskatchewan. But I, I had this class. I believe they were about Grade 4. I don't remember too much about the class except I asked a question and one little boy said, "No." And I couldn't understand, "Now what do you mean?"

GM: "Look." And I still couldn't understand. Oh he said, "You know the thing they breed cows on." That was the answer. "You know the thing they breed cows on." So that was all I remember. Sorry about that.

HR: That's okay. What do you remember about Lytton? Do remember at this time—were your experiences in Lytton similar to your experiences elsewhere or was it a difficult time or were their challenges? Positive memories?

GM: You mean as far as the teaching was concerned?

HR: Yes.

GM: Or living?

HR: Oh both. You can tell me about both.

GM: Well, as I say my husband was on ACQ pay. That's the lowest grade in the air force because he was just in training.

HR: Okay.

GM: So it was—we didn't do anything extra. Just pay whatever room and board, well not board but room. And then I had a two burner hotplate. In Regina it was a two burner coal oil stove in one room. But I don't remember being deprived, I mean we had gone through the Depression and, and never suffered at all. But people were having a difficult time, of course, through the war having to move around the country. You had to save a little bit so you could get on the train and go to the next move.

HR: Was that—why, why were they moving?

GM: It was in the winter time when I was there in fact at one point it was 50 below in Regina.

HR: Oh my gosh.

GM: But I couldn't afford to go skating at the rink, so the outdoor rinks were too cold. So I sold my skates and that was the end of the skating.

HR: Oh, oh goodness. Why, why were people moving about? To follow jobs?

GM: Well, you were moving about because you're husband's training in one place and, and took that amount of training and then you're trained in different places. Like in Regina Wilson had elementary flying and introductory and elementary, and then we moved to Yorkton because it was service flying school, different types of instruction. And then when he finished his course in, in Yorkton he got his wings there. And he wanted to be an instructor so he was posted to Trenton Ontario. So at that point I went to home to Kamloops to my parent's place because my mother needed me and I stayed there while Wilson was doing his instructor training. And after he was finished that he was posted to Centralia, Ontario. And I went to Exeter, which is a little town near the airport of Centralia. And I managed to sublet in a, in a house a little bit bigger than a one room. By this point I needed something bigger. And then I moved to an apartment after that.

HR: Okay. And do you remember how many children you had in your classes when you were at Lytton in the Grades 1 to 4?

GM: I don't really remember an exact number.

HR: But enough to, to constitute a class anyway?

GM: I think it was about 23 or 25.

HR: Okay. And presumably they would have all been doing different things on a given day?

GM: Well, I was fresh out of normal school, you see, so I had my timetable made up. Well, I did that in the summer as soon as I knew where I was going and what I was teaching. I made up my timetable and, and as many lesson plans as I could to start this.

HR: That's very good planning. How did you get the school? Did you apply to the district or to the government? How did you get the...

GM: Oh well the ads were in the paper. We always got the Province paper and the Kamloops paper and I just, I applied by a letter to the school. You had to write to the school inspector. And the inspector lived in Kamloops. So I mailed the letter there.

HR: Okay.

GM: To Mr. McArthur, I think, he was the inspector. And then—oh, I know what I did. I went to take a course in, in physical education in Vancouver. It's called a pro-rec, professional recreational course sponsored by the government.

HR: Yes I remember them.

GM: And it was all exercises, mat work, and tumbling and all those kinds of things—games and dancing. And then my mother phoned me there to say that I had got this job in Lytton.

HR: Oh, great.

GM: They had phoned her, of course, to tell her and so she phoned me in Vancouver.

HR: I see. So with the timetable and the lessons that you had made up prior to going, were they for the four different grades?

GM: Yes, yes they were. Now we had—Mr. Lord was the principal of the normal school and he was the one I can remember that taught us how to make out lesson plans, and how to make out a timetable when you had more than one grade.

HR: Okay.

GM: Which was—that was quite a thing to do, especially the first four grades to keep those little people busy. And putting seat work on the, on the blackboard and then we didn't have duplicating machines. You had to make a jelly pad.

HR: Yes.

GM: I forgotten now how you do it now, but have you, have you heard of those?

HR: Yes a few people.

GM: People told you about that?

HR: A few people have mentioned and I had never heard of them before.

GM: Like a cookie tray and you put this jelly stuff in and then make out a form, write your sentences or whatever on a paper with a special kind of ink and then put it on that pad.

HR: Where did you get the supplies? Were they supplied for you?

GM: No, you got your own.

HR: Okay.

GM: No, things like that you did for yourself. The course of study that I remember was in a, in a blue book, a paperback blue book. I don't know if they still have those or not.

HR: They do but they are not in blue books anymore.

GM: The outline of requirements for each grade.

HR: Yes, and was that provided at Lytton or did you have that from the normal school?

GM: No that was provided at Lytton.

HR: Okay. So can you remember—say, take me through a typical day in your life at the school. Do you recall the details of your day to day work?

GM: No, I don't recall too much about it.

HR: Okay.

GM: But I do know that especially when I got into the school building—let me tell you, put this little thing in here that one of the doctor's sons came to school and when they went home his mother asked him about me. She said, "Now what did you do?" And he said, "We sat in this little desk, Mom, and up in the corner there is a nice little ashtray." You know, in those days there was an inkwell.

HR: An inkwell.

GM: A typical day would, would start with the Lord's Prayer and then we would have some sort of exercise to start, or reading, or something to get the group all together. And then go on with the lessons, and I would have to take the Grade 1s first, and the other two—or three classes I would assign seat work for them to do. Papers to answer questions or do their arithmetic, their number work, or whatever.

HR: So when you brought the whole class together what kinds of—when would you do that? Just for reading? Or you would read to them or they would read together?

GM: Yes, or, or read a story. I think the afternoon—how I started the afternoon was they all sit in their places and I read a story.

HR: Okay. So after lunch?

GM: After lunch, yes. Now in a small town like that the children would go home to lunch. I had two or three farm children that came in, and they would have their lunch there.

HR: I see.

GM: Now the principal of the school would—we would take turns being there for lunch for the children, being on duty at lunch time.

HR: I see. So you had a principal in addition to another teacher?

GM: No, no the other teacher was the principal.

HR: Oh was the principal, okay.

GM: And it was a man.

HR: Okay.

GM: But I went to church here in Kamloops 4 years ago now when I first came back here and this one lady said to me, “Where did you say you taught?” And I said, “In Lytton.” Well she said, “I think my dad taught in Ashcroft in one of those little places” she said. And I said, “What was his name?” And she said, “Ross Ashton.” Oh I said, “He was one of my principals.”

HR: Oh my goodness.

GM: In Lytton in the '30s.

HR: Oh wow!

GM: So it's a small world.

HR: It certainly is. Did...

GM: As far as my life in the little town, it wasn't hard to be there. Everybody was so friendly and there was always things to do; basketball games or Saturday night they might have a dance in the Community Hall. The Legion had the building there and sometimes they had a movie. But I never bothered doing those things at night, but it was for the, you know, the town people. And, I don't know, I was never idle because I always had homework to do at night.

HR: I am sure you were very busy.

GM: And preparation for the next day. And then it says in this book that in 1940 or '39 I was lucky because a dashing young man named Wilson Miller arrived and he went to work in the general store and that was to be my future husband.

HR: Ah.

GM: So, and then I was married in '41.

HR: And that's when you left?

GM: Yes, when I left there.

HR: Do you remember getting involved much with people in the community? Or were you just too busy to?

GM: Well I seem to be quite involved in the community but one of the things was that I had a Girl Guide Company.

HR: Oh.

GM: I started Girl Guides there. And I was the captain of the company. And then I became a Thompson District Commissioner and later still was appointed the (inaudible) Division Commissioner.

HR: Oh.

GM: And these two appointments entailed travelling to Lilloett, Braelorn, Clinton, Ashcroft, Cache Creek, and Boston Bar.

HR: Oh my goodness.

GM: I must have had somebody with a car. I didn't have a car of my own. So that kept me busy.

HR: That must have.

GM: And there was a bridge club and I did also after taking that pro rec course I had a ladies gymnastic—well not gymnastic, but exercise class in the community hall.

HR: And you did that in the evenings?

GM: Yes.

HR: Wow, you were busy.

GM: And I belonged to the church and to the church group. When I left Lytton they gave me a life membership in that WA of the church.

HR: What, what church was it? Do you remember?

GM: The Anglican church.

HR: The Anglican.

GM: St. Barnibus Church. Number 18 says what kept you going on the face of hardship. Well I didn't—I don't—didn't ever remember feeling it was hardship. I had to save money to go to summer school because in those days if you had a Normal School Certificate you taught for a year, went to summer school, taught another year, and then went to summer school again. At the end of that time you got your First Class Permanent Certificate. After the war when I went back teaching I was hired in Lytton and some lady said, "Didn't you have to go back to university?" And I said, "No because the superintendent said that I had a First Class Permanent Certificate and that was good enough for him." Then when—that's when I got into a two three, Grades 2 and 3 split. A very difficult class but the teacher who had been there had been a university professor and the children were just unruly. One of the mothers said, "The children never do any homework, all they do is think of ways to bug the teacher."

HR: And what—where—what year was that again?

GM: This was in Lytton after the war. I am not quite sure what that...

HR: Okay.

GM: What year would that be, '79 maybe or '78.

HR: Okay.

GM: Around there because we left—I taught that class and then in 1980 I went to Merritt. I was—I applied for a job and got a straight Grade 1. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

HR: That, that must of been quite a change.

GM: And that's where I taught until 1990 when I retired. That was a wonderful experience teaching that Grade 1 class there.

HR: Okay. And in your letter that you sent to me you talked a little bit about the reading methods. You said that the reading program for Grade 1 when you were at Lytton in 19...

GM: When I first started it was sight reading.

HR: Yes, so essentially the look see method where they look at the word and read the sight words. They learn the sight words?

GM: Yes, we started off the very first day of school with printing their name on a little piece of paper on their desk and it said, "My name is Mary" or "My name is George."

HR: Right. And then when you returned to teaching it was then language patterns and phonics?

GM: language patterns, are you familiar with that?

HR: Yes the phonics program.

GM: With the cardboard "a" says "ah".

HR: Yes and what, what year was that?

GM: To feel with your fingers.

HR: What year would that have been?

GM: That I found was a very, very effective way of teaching reading.

HR: More effective...

GM: A lot of phonics there but the children that, that had that patterns, language patterns I felt did very well.

HR: What year was that when you then returned to teaching and began using the phonics?

GM: Let's see I went to Merritt in 1980.

HR: 1980, okay, alright.

GM: And I think I took a short summer course for that.

HR: Okay. So then the policy, I guess, changed somewhere in between those two eras.

GM: Sorry I can't hear.

HR: The policy changed, I guess, in between those two eras, the methods changed.

GM: Yes, yes.

HR: Also when you were at Lytton during the war do you remember who your inspector was at the time?

GM: Do I remember?

HR: Your inspector's name?

GM: I don't understand that?

HR: Oh the school inspector, did the school inspector ever come around and inspect you?

GM: Oh inspector, oh. That was—you mean before the war?

HR: Yeah, '36 to '41.

GM: Oh, oh yes.

HR: Did you have an inspector come around and evaluate you?

GM: I remember Mr. MacArthur and I remember my first report. I want you to go back and think when I graduated from normal school I graduated with distinction.

HR: Yes.

GM: When I got my first inspector's report he put a lot of things in there but one of the things I remember was, Litbaker's my maiden name, "Litbaker's limitations are those of the average beginner."

HR: Oh.

GM: That just shook me.

HR: Oh my goodness.

GM: I was devastated. I wanted to be good. I didn't want to be average or average beginner. Anyway the next one was better.

HR: Do you remember what your limitations were? What was he looking at mostly.

GM: I don't know so much whether it was just the way I handled the children or whether their progress...

HR: Mm-hmm.

GM: You know that book, that Colwell book, it talks a lot about those tests that they gave. Do they have those now? Those...

HR: The IQ test? Was it the IQ tests? The standardized IQ tests?

GM: Yes those standardized tests. I remember, I remember having those when I went back to Lytton and took that, that two three split. I remember teaching them and then there was supposed to be a standardized test administered. And I did that. Have you remembered about St. Georges school?

HR: Yes.

GM: The Indian residential school out in Lytton.

HR: Yes.

GM: One of the teachers that taught that same class as I did, when, when we compared the results she said, "Oh you must have been teaching to the test. You must have taught them what was on the test."

HR: Oh.

GM: I did, I did not do that. But she was surprised my results were better than hers.

HR: Did, did she have—did you have tests like that when you taught before 1941?

GM: No.

HR: No? So you didn't administer...

GM: No there was never any standardized tests then.

HR: Okay.

GM: I don't how they—well I guess they judged by what the inspector would report.

HR: I see, okay. And the other question that I had with respect to when the kids were.

GM: Sorry I am losing you.

HR: Can you hear me now?

GM: That's better.

HR: Okay. When you had the kids working on things like social studies or science, did they ever work across the grade? Did you ever integrate the grades to do assignments in, for example, studying another country?

GM: Well, I, I can't honestly say that I did. But I could've have done that.

HR: Okay.

GM: Because some of the little Grade 1 kids were smarter than the Grades 2 or 3s.

HR: Oh.

GM: But then the background was there.

HR: Okay.

GM: You see before the class—before I got them, were part of a one room school.

HR: Right.

GM: And so the Grade 2—from Grade 2 on to Grade 4 had always been part of that other group where, you know, sometimes they would listen in to whatever the instructor was—the teacher teaching to the other grades.

HR: Oh I see.

GM: Instead of doing their own, but then I can't answer to that much.

HR: I see. What about your resources? Did you have enough resources to do your job? Or were you...

GM: Did you say something?

HR: Enough resources, for example, paper.

GM: I cannot hear you.

HR: Oh did you have enough resources in that—did you have enough paper, pencils? Did you need any?

GM: I am very sorry but I have lost you altogether.