

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Russ Schnell for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. Today's date is March 25, 2022. The interviewer is Molly Graham. It's a remote interview with Dr. Schnell in Boulder, Colorado, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. Because this is a remote interview, I want to make sure I have your permission to record our conversation.

Russell Schnell: Yes, you do.

MG: Great. Well, Dr. Schnell, let's start at the beginning if you could just say where and when you were born.

RS: I was born in Castor, Alberta, Canada, on December 12, 1944.

MG: I'm curious if you could trace your family history. It sounds really interesting to me. Maybe start on your father's side.

RS: Okay, both my father and mother, their parents, and all of our ancestors, back to about 1700, were immigrants from Germany, living in eastern Russia. Catherine the Great, who was the Czarina of Russia, wanted to protect her Eastern borders. She was German, and she offered German farmers free land if they would come and live along the Volga River to form colonies, to show the Russians how to farm, and also to protect her Eastern boundaries from the Kalmyks, the Tatars, and others that were roaming into that area. So, our ancestors, which we can trace back totally by name to the 1700s, moved to this part of Russia. It took them a year from the time they left Germany until they got to Russia, and they were promised houses and horses and stuff like that. When they got there, it was open steppe. No houses, no roads, nothing. So, the first year, they had to dig into the side of hills little caves, and then they covered those over and survived. A lot of them died, of course. The next year, things were a little better. Our family and all of the other Germans in that area lived and prospered for a couple of hundred years until the early 1900s, when the Bolshevik revolution occurred in 1918, after the First World War. Then communism came in, in the '20s, so a lot of the people in the community were uncomfortable with that, and their sons were going off to war. A lot of my ancestors went off to the army, and they had to stay in for six years, and a lot of them were killed. So, our family in this one village – it was called Norka. It's near the Volga River, but it's on the river called Norka. They collected money and sent some people to Canada and the US to buy land. The early people that left basically bought land in Nebraska when the railways were offering it cheap. The time that my ancestors got ready to leave, there wasn't much cheaper free land in the US, so they ended up going near Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. So, what they would do is they would send one person over to buy a little land, and then that person in the country would then earn a little money and send it back to Russia so that then the rest of the people could come over. Both paternal and maternal grandparents came from this same village, and, of course, they'd grown up together and knew each other. My paternal grandparents got married at eighteen and then left within a few days. You couldn't really travel with a girlfriend without being married, so they got married. They hardly knew each other, but they came. My maternal grandparents were a little bit older, and they came with about four children, including my mother, who was the oldest. They settled eventually on adjoining farms with my paternal grandparents near Caster, Alberta. So, the whole group of these people speaking their language, which was a very archaic German,

tended to hang together. One would buy land, and then everybody would just buy it around it. So, our group of people eventually owned about eighty square miles of farmland in one area, about twelve miles northeast of Castor. They built their own church. They spoke their own language, basically, and they were kind of isolated. But my paternal grandfather had been a wheelwright and a wagon maker in Russia – was either encouraged or coerced to move into the town and set up a blacksmith shop to help all the people because they were working with horses and wagons, and they needed repairs all the time. So, he set up a blacksmith shop in this small town of under a thousand. So, he did that, and then my father, his two brothers – my grandfather, father, and [his] two brothers all worked together. We were the only family that didn't live on a farm. We were the town people. Since they had been fairly well trained when they were younger, they became the center of where the agricultural people maintained their equipment. It was not a lucrative life, but they were the center of their community. The church was twelve to fifteen miles from town, so that church maintained itself in the country. That was the center of all of the life. I was related eventually to over two hundred of the people in the area because all of the farmers who came were related, and then it was just one big family. I grew up quite different than all of my cousins. I had eventually, maybe forty to fifty cousins, many of them I couldn't even remember after a while. Of course, living in town, I lived a very different life than the kids on the farm because they didn't come into town to go to school; they went to little one-room schools in their area. My mother, when she first went to school, didn't speak, of course, English, and it was quite tough for her. But, of course, she had a lot of cousins there. She grew up, and then my mother and father got married a little bit later than most other people. My father had to learn English, and then he had to go to a technical college to become a mechanic because you couldn't really run a business without having somebody who was licensed by the province. So, he became a mechanic. My mother, when she was in her twenties, went to work as a servant in a big city for a number of years, working for families there, but eventually, they got married. As I said before, my grandfather initially – both grandfathers had adjoining farms, and the farms then went to the sons. So, one of my uncles took my paternal grandfather's farm, and those farms stayed. They've stayed until just recently, still within the family. So, I grew up in this town, went to the big school, it was called; there might have been a hundred kids in the whole twelve grades. Of course, my paternal grandfather and his wife and other children lived in the town, also. In the town, we became integrated fairly quickly because speaking German during the Second World War was not a good thing, so we were commanded or otherwise learned English and spoke only English. So, I started learning this archaic German and speaking it, but immediately, when I was able to speak English, that was it. The older people always still spoke the Volga German, and my maternal and paternal grandmother never learned English. They were beyond that at that age. But when I grew up in the town, it was really good because everybody took care of each other in the town. In the morning, if I wasn't going to school – on a weekend, I would leave in the morning and go play with friends. If I didn't come home for lunch, my mother didn't care because she knew I was at some relative or friend's place. Eventually, you'd check-in in the evening. The town had an alarm at 9:30 PM. The siren would go off, and every child had to be off the street at 9:30. So she knew I'd be home at 9:30. All of us kids would play in a huge area. We had about a hundred square miles – that sounds like a lot, but that's only ten miles by ten miles – where there were creeks and running water and trees. We would be out there all the time. We had bows and arrows, and we'd build little huts. We would camp out a lot. Our parents were very, very – I don't know. There's a word for it nowadays. But the kids just let out, and the whole community took care of us and also gave us discipline.

Yes, other people would twist your ear. That was the way to make a child obey. If you did something wrong, somebody you didn't really know would twist your ear and say, [speaks foreign language] "Be careful. Don't do that." So, we grew up like that. I went to school. I didn't like school because it took me away from roaming around the countryside. I would just sit in school and watch the clock until it was time to go home. School was kind of rough. In those days, corporal punishment was very prevalent, and you can't see it, but I have a swelling on my head; it's misshapen where the principal once beat me up, and I missed a few days of school because my head was so swollen. It was just accepted. But the principal and all of the teachers – male teachers – had been in the war. In Canada, when you went into the Army, you went off to the war, and you didn't come home until the war was over. So, I had one uncle who was gone for five and a half years. When all of these soldiers came back, they were allowed to become teachers [almost automatically] because they didn't have any farmland when they came back. They weren't married because all of the women got married while they were gone. There was a whole group of these dysfunctional soldiers. And Canada had a much, much higher percentage of soldiers per capita than the US, about five times larger. So, every male of that age, except my father and a couple of others, were drafted. He had to stay because he was important in the community to keep farming going. But, all of these teachers, male teachers, were suffering from PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] from being in the war. They went in and started in 1939 and didn't come home until '46. I had five or six uncles like that, and three of them never got married because when they came back, they were in their late twenties. Or early thirties. All the young ladies had moved away or stuff. Some of them got married later in life. Three got married in their sixties when there were widows available. So, there's this whole group of dysfunctional people who'd come back to the town, and they took up menial jobs or were a little bit more educated. People with a grade eleven education were your teachers and principals. It was kind of rough. As I say, I didn't like school at all. In Canada, we only had just under two months of summer vacation. We had to go until July 1, and then we were back in school on September 1. So, summers were the best time of my life. As my grandfather and father had the workshop, I spent a lot of time there, watching them weld and cut and shoe horses and build things, and they made me do a lot of things. In winter, it was pretty hard to go outside, so they would build wagon boxes and truck boxes. My job would be to push the bolts through so that they could fix it on the other side. So, I was made to do things. I didn't know it, but I was learning how to do woodwork and how to weld and how to do other things without really being taught specifically. I was a fairly good student because my parents and others told us that we had to go to school and be the best, and we were very obedient children. The farm kids worked at home on the farms all the time. When they got to school, it was great for them because they didn't have to work. So, they were good students for the most part, too. In the town, everybody knew each other. In a town of a thousand, there were only about four or five houses I was never in. If there was a kid, you'd go to their house to play. If they were older people, they'd invite you in for a cookie and stuff like that. We had organizations [such as] Cubs, but we didn't have Scouts. So, a friend of mine and I used to get a magazine called *Boy's Life*. We found out that there were Scouts and that also you could have jamborees. So, we went to a minister of one of the churches and asked him if he'd start a Scout troop, and he did, and we joined. We were the first Scouts in this. We met in a church basement, and after a couple of years of being in Scouts, the county – or it was called a municipality – had moved an old one-room school into town because kids were starting to be trucked and bussed into school. So, they needed more [room], so these one-room schools were brought in and put on this big lot. So, kids would go to a

one-room school in the city or a town because there were no other schools. Eventually, they built a new school. Actually, the new school was built out of old barracks lumber that the military had had – military barracks, not in town, but nearby. So, they took those barracks and made them into a school. So, this one-room school was empty. My friend and I went to the school division and asked if they would donate that to the Scouts, and they did; they gave us a free building, so now we had a scout hall. My friend and I were Scouts, and then we progressed a bit. Then there was a jamboree going to be held in the mountains in Alberta. We didn't have much money. We went to the town council and got them to give us some money. They gave us ten dollars each. That may not sound like much, but the average salary for a working person was fifty cents an hour, so that was a lot of money. That helped us get to the jamboree. But also, the biggest change in my life that occurred probably in that small town was that they had something equivalent to the US Civil Air Patrol, but it's much, much larger. It's ten times larger per capita than in the US. In Canada, they have twenty-thousand people; in the US, they also had twenty-thousand people, but the US has ten times the population. So, this was a big deal. We had a squadron of Air Cadets, and I joined at thirteen. That was really interesting and good because it gave us opportunities where the military would support us; they gave us money, uniforms, and a couple of times a year, they would send a bus to our town, take all of the cadets away for two days to an airbase, and show us and let us go up and fly in planes – not fly, but ride in planes and go to where they made their parachutes – really showed us a new life. But they also had scholarships for cadets, Air Cadets, as they were called. You would apply, go to various interviews, and I was fortunate enough to get a flying scholarship when I was in grade eleven. So, for the summer of grade eleven, I was trained to be a pilot. We called it the “Children's Air Force.” A lot of the leadership in the Canadian military came out of that Cadet Corps. But also, in our town, we had a small newspaper, and the editor of that newspaper one day asked me if I would like a job with him. I, of course, said yes, because that was a chance to make thirty cents an hour working. So, every day after school, I would work from four until six as a printer's apprentice, and on the weekends, I would work eight hours on Saturday. That way, I was one of the kids in town that had a little money, which was pretty rare. I did that for three years and became a fairly good printer, learning how to do actual newspaper printing and custom printing. He gave me a lot of freedom to do other printing jobs. So that was good, and it kept me busy, kept me out of trouble because I was working after school every day and on the weekends. We are friends to this day. He's now in his nineties and still alive. He lives in a different town, and we are still in touch. Anyway, after the summer training, there was another competition across Canada for Air Cadets to be selected to go overseas for the summer. It was an exchange program. I applied and went through a lot of different interviews in the cities. We were living two hundred miles from any kind of a city, so we'd take a day or so and go to a city and get interviewed. Eventually, I was selected to be one of two cadets from all of Canada to go to Israel for the summer and be a guest of the Israeli Air Force. That was quite an interesting experience because myself and one other cadet from Ontario, Canada, went overseas. We flew in a military airplane to Germany. Then, in Germany, the US Air Force took us down to Italy. Then, in Italy, the Israeli Air Force came up, but we weren't officially being transferred, so the US plane landed and then went to the end of a deserted runway, and the Israeli Air Force brought in a small plane, and we transferred out in the end of the runway. Nobody really knew what we were doing, and then the Israeli airplane took us to Israel. In Israel, we spent a very interesting summer. We traveled. They took us all over the country, literally, from the North. Every day, we were traveling around meeting people. We actually met the head of all of the Israeli Defense Forces;

we had half a day with him. The rest of the time, we were visiting other parts of the country, right down to the south, Sharm el-Sheikh and Eliat right on the Red Sea. Then, one day, out of craziness – we were in uniform all the time, except this one day that we had to get a kibbutz uniform. They took us up to the border with Syria, right into that area. We were all in civilian kibbutzim clothes, and they showed us around. I think they were a little irreverent and dangerous at times. We flew in good planes. We flew in rickety planes. We drove in buses and stuff like that. But also, we met a lot of the soldiers. Something was interesting. Some of the soldiers one night – and us kids – got a little drunk. They told us that they used to guard an area where they were doing nuclear stuff. They more or less hinted that Israel was building nuclear weapons. The place was Dimona. Actually, many years later, it was found out that they were. So, a set of kids, eighteen years old, were told that they had nuclear secrets. But they also told us that they were highly-trained, the Air Force, especially. A pilot had to fly almost every day, a fighter pilot. They would go on duty, and they would be on duty for a week. They would fly every day just to keep their flying skills up, and then they'd have time off. This was born out – we went in 1963, and in '67, they had the [Six-Day] War, and they had airplanes coming out of airfields that the Israelis didn't even know that they were there. They were very effective. But going back to living in the little town, my father had to work long hours; he worked every day from nine until six, and then he went back to work from seven until eleven at night. Then they worked every Saturday and half a day Sunday. After church on Sunday, the farmers would bring in their broken things because they had to work on Monday. So, there were times – we'd go to school earlier in the morning – I would go for maybe four or five days and never see him because he was working or he couldn't come home, or he had to go out to a farm. If he went out, sometimes he'd stay overnight to work. There were periods where he would come home and say, "You know, I haven't seen Russell for a few days." My mom would say, "Oh, he and the Air Cadets went off to the coast. They'll be home next weekend." "Yeah, okay." It was very *laissez-faire* in that respect. The mothers ran the houses and took care of the children. The fathers were very aloof in that respect. If there were meetings at the school, only the mother would ever go. The church was very strong. The minister of the church was an autocrat. He would actually – when I was young, I remember there was a family that the mother died, so he arranged for the children to be taken by other families unofficially – "that child goes there; that child goes there. Thank you very much." They grew up in the community, but they weren't officially ever adopted or anything. That was it. It worked quite well. But everybody had many, many children my mother's age. She and her family had eleven. I think one died. My paternal grandparents had nine, but that was the norm. So, you can imagine when they married, how many cousins one had, and then it just blossomed. But nearly everybody stayed on the farm, essentially until about a few years after some of us went to university. I was selected and told to go to university to come back and be the local doctor. So, I went to university. I did very well because we were told to work. Since I'd never had a history of partying or drinking or anything like that, on weekends and nights, all I did was study and work, and I took extra courses. My parents knew nothing about university. To get to university, I hitchhiked to the city two hundred miles; it took me a day to get there. I had no concept of what university really was like. University in those days was very cheap. I had saved enough money to pay for my university. Room and board and tuition was about eight hundred dollars a year. I signed up for a lot of courses [and] took courses on Saturday, not knowing any [better]. The university was really interesting because there was no real guidance. You just did what you signed up [to do]. It was a university that was growing fast. Mostly city kids went there, not rural kids because all the

population lived in the city. So, I ended up working very hard. In my second year, I was one of the top students in the university, and I was accepted to medical school. But at the same time, I won a scholarship to any university in Canada. So, I decided to take a year off. I selected a university that was absolutely farthest from where I could possibly go, which was St John's, Newfoundland. So, I got on a train, and three days or four days later, I was in St. John's, Newfoundland, which was a fishing village. Very interesting. I did well at the university there. The University of Alberta took my credits that I had there and the credits I got from Newfoundland and gave me a degree. I took another course when I came back to Alberta, and then Newfoundland gave me a degree, so I got two degrees in three years because I had so many credits. But having traveled and seeing much of the world, I put off going back to medical school for one year because I got a very interesting job with something called the Alberta Hail Studies, where they needed a pilot to go out after hail storms and look where the hail damage had been. I loved that job. So, I stayed working there and had worked off and on for years. So, I never did go to medical school. That's the bottom line. One day, at the Alberta Hail Studies, a group from the University of Wyoming was there with another aircraft doing flights, and the director of that aircraft program said he was starting a new atmospheric science department in Wyoming, University of Wyoming. He asked me if I'd come and be his first student. I said, "Oh, I don't think so. I'm going to probably go to medical school next year; it's about time." He said, "Well, I'll pay you. That really got my interest. He said, "I'll pay you just like a normal university staff." "You're crazy." "And I'll pay your tuition." So, I said, "Okay, I'll come, but I'll have to put it off for a year," because I'd won another scholarship, a rotary scholarship to Europe. In the application for the scholarship, they asked me where I wanted to go. So, my writing was very bad. I wrote "Sweden" because I wanted to join the sexual revolution. I was still a very unsexually educated person. So, I wrote Sweden, but I wrote S-W, and then a vowel – eden. I assumed I was going to Sweden. When the committee looked at that, they said, "Okay, S-W-vowel," and they counted the number and said, "Okay, the only thing that matches is Swansea." So, I ended up in Swansea, Wales, for a year. And Swansea, Wales, as you may know, at that time, was a very strict Christian place. You didn't kiss a girl until you were concerned that you were going to get married. So, my introduction to the sexual revolution was non-existent. But I managed to rent a room in a large house, where there were a number of other people living. There was another student there in Swansea from the US from Nebraska who was also there on a Rotary scholarship. We became friends, and I would bring her over to my house for dinner and talk. She met one of my older roommates, and they hit it off quite well. He was a licensed barrister, which means lawyer. Long story short, they hit it off quite well. After she went back to Nebraska, he came over and proposed to her. They got married there, and then she went back to Wales. He eventually became a queen's counsel, which means that – it's a fairly high honor in Britain. When he would go to the meetings of the different barristers, he'd wear a big white wig, red pantaloons with white socks; it was really quite funny. It looked like a Halloween costume. But they lived in Swansea, where the university was, and they had at least five children: two doctors, one member of parliament – I don't know what the other daughter did, and then the youngest one was a rebel. He didn't do well in school. He was a soccer fan. I don't think he ever married, but the other ones did very well. Now they've got grandchildren up the wazoo. I visit him whenever I go to Europe. Every couple of years, I go to visit them, and we're still very good friends. After I came back from Wales, I went to Wyoming to take up studies. At the same time, Don Veal, who had started the atmospheric science department, had hired a Hungarian refugee who had earned his Ph.D. at the same time who had worked at

Alberta. So, I already had a good friend there, and he was my advisor. My research – I had been a hail studies person working with hail studies, and that involved flying but mostly driving out and looking at where hailstorms started. The hail itself has to start on a little particle. That starts the hailstone forming. Everybody up until that time thought these were dust particles, but in my experience out watching the hailstorms start – and I probably was in fifty or sixty hailstorms; I had a pretty good idea what they look like when they start. The area in Alberta where they started was over a forested area, and they would be rotating clouds. You could see particles going up in there because the updrafts were so high. So, Dr. Vali asked me – he said, “What do you think is the nucleus for these things?” I said, “Obviously, it’s vegetation particles because they start over forests, and then they suck up particles you can see,” and they all laughed at me. But he let me test, and in fact, yes – within about a few weeks, I had tested materials and shown him that particles from decayed vegetation were excellent ice nuclei. As they were decaying, there was a certain point where they produced even better ice nuclei. Eventually, those were found to be living bacteria. Long story short, those living bacteria were eventually taken by Kodak Company and made into a material. They grew them in big vats and then killed them. It was called SNOWMAX. That is now used in every ski hill on Earth that makes snow because you can now make snow at almost freezing temperatures and very efficiently. So, it’s a very big business. But I didn’t patent the idea even though we were using it; a lawyer at the University of Wisconsin did that. The whole patent is only three-quarters of a page long. Then they sold it to different companies. Eventually, Kodak developed it, but they sold it eventually, too. The first real good use of it was in the Canadian Calgary Olympics when there was no snow in the winter. So, they used it to make snow on the trails and on the ski hills, which is good now. I never got any money out of it, but I got a lot of PR [public relations], I guess. That was my master’s and Ph.D. at Wyoming.

MG: I wonder if I can stop you here and ask a number of follow-up questions before we get too far along.

RS: Certainly.

MG: I even have questions that go back to the beginning of our conversation about your ancestors in the Volga River region. I was curious if they were part of the German Mennonites who had come with the promise of avoidance of conscription. Were they pacifists?

RS: They were similar to the Mennonites, but they weren’t the Mennonites. But there was a Mennonite colony nearby. What the Russians did was smart. In each colony, they only allowed one religion. You could either be a Catholic colony, you could be a Mennonite colony, or you could be a Christian colony. Ours happened to be a Christian colony, but one of my ancestors on the way over was Catholic. There was a woman with children, and her husband had died enroute, so he joined her and didn’t tell her he was Catholic. But the Mennonites were just down the river. The Mennonites were very, very strong as a colony. When they decided to move, they moved; the whole colony just went. I don’t know how they did it. But yes, same idea.

MG: Do you know the Volga Germans were treated by people in Russia? It seemed like they were really insulated and maintained their customs, tradition, and language. How were they treated?

RS: Initially, for the first hundred, hundred fifty years very well, because they were self-sufficient colonies. They traded among themselves. There weren't many Russian people living around there, actually, because it was a Kalmyks and Tatars area, which they were forced out. When the Germans came in, the nomads moved farther east. But there was a period where the nomads came in and would capture people in the colonies and kill them and take the women back for slaves to sell in the markets for slaves. That was another reason why people decided they had to move at some point. So basically, the Mennonites and the Evangelicals, as we were called, knew each other. The Mennonites developed certain crafts; they would make cloth and make other things, which they sold to our people. There was a lot of trade. But otherwise, until probably around the 1900s, things were very good. The Germans were prosperous. They lived among themselves. They had their own language. Only a few of them ever spoke Russian because they had nothing to do with the Russians. Some of them spoke Yiddish because of the traders that would come in regularly. Jewish traders would come in, who'd come from the city, they'd come and trade with them. So, some people had to learn Yiddish. Some of the soldiers, of course, when they went off, learned Russian, but most of them died, either from disease or from wounds or something. So, a lot of the people went off. When a soldier went off, a whole community would hold – not a celebration – a funeral for that person because they figured they'd never come back. That was pretty well true. One of my ancestors went off to war in the east and was captured. He came back speaking Chinese. He was young, and he was in a Chinese prisoner of war camp. I don't know why they kept him alive, but he came back knowing Chinese. He was a very close relative. So, my mother learned to speak a bit of Chinese. When I was a kid, she would jokingly teach me to count in Chinese, just to be different, I guess, to show that she'd learned something.

MG: This is jumping ahead, and then we'll jump back. During your career, you spent a lot of time in Russia. Did you ever visit the Volga region?

RS: Not exactly it. I was close, yes. But one of my relatives did. He was a successful farmer in Alberta, and he raised high-quality cattle. There was a time when Canada was sending high-quality cattle to Russia. He took a shipment of cattle and actually went back and visited the village. He tells a story that during a famine time in the village, each farmer had to give a certain amount of grain each year to put in a huge storage building because there were periods when there was no good crop return, and they all lived off themselves with crops. There were actually seven of these huge granaries they built. During one famine, his family was starving, so one of his relatives went over to the granary and drilled a hole in the bottom and siphoned out bags and bags of grain at night, and then plugged the hole. Of course, he told the family; this was family history. So, one of my partial uncles went back to this granary, crawled underneath, and actually found where the hole was and the patch. So, he had verified the story. It was a legend until he came back and told everybody, "Yeah, it's really there." So, there were things like that that were interesting.

MG: It was your grandparents' generation that immigrated. When was that?

RS: They started sending people over before the First World War because the Russians were gearing up, and they were taking all the young people. So, some of the first people came out in

the early 1900s. My family didn't get out until the 1920s because the families that they had sent earlier had to earn money enough to pay the shipping and stuff. So, they came over in the 1920s or so. So, there was a period of about fifteen years where people would leave. Then there were a lot of people left there. Some of the older people stayed, and they were still a functioning community until the Germans invaded Russia. All of the German colonies on the Volga were forcibly removed over a space of a few days and sent to Kazakhstan or to Siberia in the Far North. An interesting story – many years later, I went to Russia a lot for a lot of different reasons. I was working up on the north Siberian coast in a town called Cherskiy. There were Germans from that area, Germans in there, and they still remembered that their great grandparents and their grandparents were exiled there. They actually still could speak some German. But this is where their parents had been put in the Gulag. Then, after the gulags broke up in the '50s and '60s, of course, they just stayed there. I became friends of one family like that in this town of Cherskiy on the Arctic coast. But anyway, back to your questions.

MG: I was going to ask if your family knew anybody who had been forcibly deported or when they became aware that that could have been their fate had they remained.

RS: Fairly quickly because people wrote back and forth. There were letters in German that my family kept. They knew that, and they were happy that they got out when they did. Things were a little tough after the Bolsheviks took over because they would come into a town, and they would take all of the Kulaks, as they called the rich people and the leaders, and kill them. They'd do it publicly, or they would disappear overnight. There was a lot of fear, and people were desperate to get out. Eventually, the Russians figured out what was happening, or the Soviets, whoever you want to call them. So, they closed off the transport to the west. Some of the people then moved east, and they actually ended up in Harbin, China. They came across the border. There was a large German colony in Harbin. It's still there, part of it. They assimilated, so they had this separate group of people. We had relatives that were in China, and then they came back around eventually. But a lot of them died on the way, of course, from disease and whatever else.

MG: Can you say again how they found this community in Alberta.

RS: The land that was given to immigrants initially was free. So, this happened in the 1910 period – thousands and thousands of acres. So most of the people who took that land were British because Canada was still under the British flag. It was independent, but it was still a British country kind of. So, they gave the land to British people. These British people came over, and they wanted to be good farmers, but they couldn't because they came from Britain, where the climate was different. A lot of them brought over money, so they built houses and started. But, in about ten years of living, they realized they couldn't do it. So, they were either going bankrupt or dying, or their wives would leave them and go back to Britain because it was cold, and there was no water or sewer. You had to have a well, and you had a bucket you had to put down. It was terrible. So, there was this whole area where the British had settled; that land was selling cheaper. They were almost giving it away because they were leaving. That's where these people moved because there was this huge area of British farmers that were leaving or abandoning their farms. So, they could get the land cheap because, of course, we didn't have much money, and loans were difficult; you couldn't get loans for land. So, one person who had money would go buy a little land, and then he would raise a few cattle and raise some, and then

he'd help his friends. So, everybody, just as a nucleus, moved out, and they were all relatives. Then they built a church in the center. It just kept getting bigger and bigger. There was a certain point where land prices got higher, and there weren't any more people coming in. So, like a little organism, it grew out. The land was not the best land, of course. It was in an area where every few years, there was a drought. But the people managed it. So back to me being set off to be a doctor to come back, and I never did. That same thing happened with a lot of other kids because we'd grown up only seeing blue-eyed, blonde women. When we went to university or went off to the city to earn a trade, there were people with black hair; there were people that were tall; there were people that were different. Whoa. This was just kind of interesting. So long story short, I married a Chinese [woman]. My cousin married a Palestinian. Another cousin married a full-blooded Native American. Another cousin went to Europe and married a Belgian. We didn't marry within the group – the ones that left the town. The ones that stayed on, yes, married the girl next door, and they kept their farms and grew. But any of us that went to cities or went to university, most of us did not come back, and we married exotic because we'd never seen people like that. "Wow."

MG: Or had the opportunity to meet anyone else.

RS: Of course. In the town, we never did. We only knew people in our church or in the school. The people in school were farm kids. So, after school, they'd go home, and you'd never see them again until next Monday.

MG: You've mentioned the church a couple of times. What kind of church was it? What role did it play in your growing up?

RS: The church was the center of the community. It was called a Brethren Church. Only the people who'd come from Russia would go there. Other people, if they tried to come in, would feel uncomfortable very quickly. Of course, it didn't have electricity or water or anything like that. So, in the winter, different people would go on a Saturday and start the furnace to get it warm. Then all the people would gather; it was a social event. So, you'd go to the church, and you'd have your church, which was long and in German. The kids – I would just suffer, but we had to sit in front and set straight the whole time. Men sat on the right, women on the left, and never mixed the sexes. The women all wore kerchiefs on their heads and little veils. After church, there was a big social event. You'd talk for a while. Then, of course, you'd be invited to lunch at different places. So, the rest of the afternoon, you would be at somebody's house, or they'd come to your house, and you'd have a meal. Then you'd have two meals; you'd have the lunch, and then you'd have another dinner. Then you'd talk and play cards and bullshit. The kids would play until ten or eleven, and then the people would go home. But again, the houses didn't have electricity. So, you had lamps and candles and stuff like that. The electricity didn't come in until the mid-'50s. After that, then you got sewer. I grew up in the town. We didn't have water and sewer. We had electricity, but we had outdoor toilets. In winter, that was kind of tough, especially if you had to dig – my father would have to dig a path to the toilet. But we never got water and sewer until I was in grade three or four. The school had water and sewer, which was great. So that's where we did our toiletry.

MG: Do you remember that being a big deal when the utilities came in?

RS: Oh, yeah, man. That's all people talked about – the farmers – because we only talk to farmers. “Oh, man. I have to pay for ten poles. Where am I going to get that money?” Then some of them didn't put it until later until they saw how the other people – but yes, it was incredible. Now you could pump water. You could have lights. You could have a furnace. So, my father started putting in coal stokers for people. In the East, people were getting gas and oil. So, they would send the old stoker parts out to the rural West, and my father would buy these furnace coal-moving things and put them in for the farmers. So, he'd sometimes go away for a week in winter when there wasn't much repair of equipment and put in furnaces. So, he'd load up a furnace and go put it in for one farmer. So, we wouldn't see him for a week. With the snow, the roads weren't very clean, either. So, when a big storm came in, you were locked up for a couple of days. Often in the winter, we would have four or five kids staying at our house because a storm would come up during the day; the school buses couldn't go, so they'd parcel out all the kids, and relatives would take them. We'd have a great time – no school, play all day long, go out in the snow. It was great. Those were great times when that would happen.

MG: Earlier, you said that both families had abutting farms. I was curious if they got along or if they were in competition? What was the relationship?

RS: Never in competition. Often, the family would have five or six brothers and sisters around, and they would help with sharing machinery and working together. If one farmer got hurt or got sick, which was quite common, people had a lot of accidents, and they wouldn't really go to the doctor, or they couldn't. So, the other farmers would then come in, put in the crop for them, help them with their family, [and] feed the cattle. Then, in the fall, everybody would get together to do the harvesting. As a kid, I would go out to my maternal grandfather's in the summer before I went to school. I spent most of my summers out there because my mother had another child fairly quickly after me within a year. We were kind of poor. So, she had boarders. You know what boarders are? She always had at least a couple of men living in our house. That was busy for her, and Father never was around to help. So, she had to make their meals, and she did three meals a day for these people. If they were working out in the oilfield or something, she had to make their lunches; she did their laundry for them. So, in the summer, as soon as she could, she sent me out to her mother and dad's place because there were four or five aunts there and a couple of uncles, and I was the first grandchild. I remember during threshing season, it was still done with horses. So, I would go out with the men in the morning. The horses would come in with their hay racks, and they'd put it into the threshing machines. The grain would go out into this big building, and somebody was in there, moving it around with a shovel. I would stay there, and then there would be a lunch [that would] come out around ten. The women would bring it out maybe a couple of miles, and then everybody would have a coffee break. Then, at lunch, we'd have a big lunch. Then there'd be another coffee break around four. They'd work until dark or when the air-cooled off, and then the grain started to get a little tough from condensation. It was a very long day. That was great because out there, you could see coyotes, and there were birds and hawks, all kinds of hawks because when they were picking up the grain stooks, the mice were underneath them. The hawks knew that, so they'd come out and watch all that. It was great. Of course, as soon as I got tired– I would fall asleep during the day at different times in the shade of the granaries and stuff like that, but I spent a lot of my summers from age two until six out on the farm like that. That farm was still in the family until recently.

Other sons and grandsons took it. But now what has happened – of course, you know the farms are growing growling. Where everybody before had maybe a section – six hundred and forty acres – now a farmer will have two, three thousand acres and big machines. Of course, they absorb all of these smaller farms. Most of them would get sold to relatives under good deals. Like, my uncle bought a farm from a relative for almost nothing just to keep it in the family structure. So there still are – when I go back, I go back at least once a year to the community. We have all the relatives and stuff like that, and tell stories and drive around and say, “Oh, that was his farm. Remember when that one-room school was here? Your mother and father were there.” “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

MG: Sounds like it was a working farm. What kind of crops would they produce?

RS: Oh, yes. It was a total subsistence farm. You only went to a store to buy sugar and salt. Everything else you raised. You raised animals. Each of the farms basically were a grain farm to start with, but then they had pasture for cattle. So, every farm had grain, cows, pigs, turkeys, [and] chickens, and then they had a huge garden. In the fall, you would harvest enough to live for the winter. So, my mother’s sister and her husband had a large farm, where we would go out and plant a couple of acres of potatoes. Then we would get together with them and all of the kids in the fall. We would actually get a truckload, a real truckload of potatoes. Then we would bring that to our home. We had a root cellar, and we would just dump the potatoes in. We did the same with carrots and cabbage. We had carrots, cabbage, [and] turnips that we stored, and then all of the garden things like peas, beets, carrots, cauliflower, cabbage, would all be canned – put in big, two-quart sealers. We had hundreds and hundreds of sealers my mother would make over periods of a few weeks and storing this stuff. That’s where the sugar and the salt were used to store those. And we would go pick wild berries, pails, and pails of wild berries, saskatoons mainly, and they were made into our desserts. So, our desserts were almost always saskatoons that were saved up. Each meal had potatoes, meat, and saskatoons. So, we lived on meat, pork, and beef, and chicken, and turkey, and then, of course, potatoes. We’d sometimes have potatoes three meals a day – fried potatoes for breakfast, mashed potatoes for lunch, and then maybe stewed potatoes in cream and milk for dinner. But also, the meat was stored, either smoked – we’d make huge amounts of sausage and store that. So, everybody was essentially – you never went to a store. Well, you did occasionally, but I never learned to go to a store to buy anything. It just was not in the culture.

MG: Speaking of food, were you eating traditional German dishes?

RS: Yeah, nothing but. The non-German people and the English, as we call them, would rarely get together for dinner. I went once – I only ate maybe three times in my early life outside of the German culture. In the town, a friend of mine, a British family, invited me, and it was just so different because the beef came in, and the father – it was put in front of him. He would slice off a [slice of] meat or two and give it around. Then the beef would disappear into the kitchen, and that was it. In our family, everything was passed around. But in the English house, the man of the house cut and served you, and then that was it. You never got seconds or thirds. In our family, everything was in the middle, and you just grabbed and took it around. Then you had a specific dessert. You always had a dessert to the meal, a pie or pudding or saskatoons or something like that.

MG: You alluded earlier that some of your family members might have experienced some anti-German sentiment, and I was curious how that manifested or what experiences they had.

RS: Very much so. Because when the Second World War was coming, they started conscripting. They conscripted a lot of people. Our family, living in the town – and my grandmother didn't speak English. After the soldiers went off – something very interesting – the first soldier killed in the Second World War was from Castor, from the town. Then, when they had the Dieppe Raid – I don't know if you know about that, but that's when the British decided to test how the Germans would react to an attack. So, the British selected Canadian troops to do the Dieppe Raid, and they attacked the well-fortified city of Dieppe. It was a total disaster. The Calgary tanks – Calgary is one of the bigger cities, one of the two cities in Alberta – had a regiment called the Calgary Tanks, and that's where all of the British people from our town joined the Calgary Tanks. They were in the Dieppe Raid. So, some of them were killed, and some of them were put in prison camps. So, after that happened, there was a lot of anti-sentiment against the Germans because the Germans had killed the boys from the town. There were a lot killed, actually. There's a special cemetery in the town just for soldiers that were killed, but most of them didn't come back. If you were killed in a flying accident or something, you were buried there. Then after, when you came back as a soldier, if you died, you were buried in the Legion's cemetery. There still is a very active Legion Hall there from the descendants of the people. Anyway, back to you – yes. One particular event was there were some boys who – most of the people who didn't go into the Calgary Tanks went into the Air Force because the Air Force was fighting in Germany from 1939 on in bombers. So, a lot of the people went into the Air Force because it was an act of duty. Two young boys from the town became pilots, and they were obviously well respected. They were from the two leading British families in the town. They did a prank on the time that they were home before they were sent to Europe. They made a swastika flag and put the swastika on it. Then, the night they left, they ran it up on the town flagpole. Then, they left, and the next day, it was there. People thought, "Oh, the Germans in town did that." In those days, there was no police force in towns like this. You had a person who was a magistrate, self-appointed [inaudible]. It was kind of interesting how the legal structure worked because we were two hundred miles out from any city, and things like that were developed. So, they put together a group, and they came to my paternal grandfather's and grandmother's house and searched it for materials. They actually found my grandmother had been repairing some jeans, you wore patched clothes, and part of the material on the flag was jeans. So, they assumed that they had done this. For a few days, they were really hassled. But then the boys sent a note back and said, "Hey, how did you like our flag?" So that pressure was off. But yes, the British people rarely, after that, ever used the services of the business. They went to another person who had a similar business until probably the 1970s; then, we were assimilated because when we went to college, everything changed. But the church existed until almost 1990 as the center, but then, since everybody left and the farms sold, it was amalgamated with another church. Until that point, that was still the center that kept everything together.

MG: Was there anything in Canada like the German American Bund that cropped up around this time? These were Nazi sympathizers in the United States,

RS: Not that I'm aware of because the Germans that were there were not really Germans from Germany. They were from Russia, and they had no allegiance with Germany once they left their relatives; there weren't any relatives left in Germany, and your only life was your colony. So, when that came to Canada, your Germans from Russia, you were actually a completely different people. The German you spoke was very different. It was 17th-century archaic German. It was very difficult for a regular German to speak with the "Volga Deutsche" as they were called. The language was quite different.

MG: I was also curious what stories your parents shared with you about their childhood and their experiences growing up.

RS: Very little, very little. They were just totally to assimilate. But when I went to my grandparents' houses, I would see pictures on the wall of their brothers who had been in the Army. When you were in the Army, at some point, you always took a picture and sent it home. So, we had pictures of different people in Russian uniforms, and they always intrigued me. I still have some of the pictures of my – three or four generations back – great, great grandparents. Pictures were made of them. But they never talked about them. Everything was current. You succeed now, you assimilate, and you do well.

MG: You mentioned your mom worked as a servant in a big city. I was curious about which big city it was and what her work was like there.

RS: In Edmonton, Alberta, she worked for one family for many years, taking care of the family. The only day off they ever had was part of Sunday. They were allowed to go to church Sunday morning, but they had to make Sunday dinner for the family. So, Sunday afternoon, they would socialize. There were a lot of young ladies that did this, that went to do that partially because all the old men were off in the Army and the war. The women on the farms would normally have gotten married at eighteen to nineteen, but they didn't. So, there was a dearth of men. There wasn't much for a woman to do on the farm because there were so many other kids there, so a lot of the women would go and become servants. There was a whole group. My mother had a whole group of friends – again, Germans from Russia, but maybe not necessarily from our town. Because the Germans from Russia did this in a number of places. There were about five areas in Alberta where they were concentrated like that. We would occasionally, when we were young, have weekends where we would go to the other town and have youth gatherings, and we would stay with their family for a night and get to know each other. But that stopped in the '70s because all of us moved out. The educated ones that went to university or tech school and never went back.

MG: I still have some questions about the family dynamic, but just it popped into my head to ask – it sounds like you were encouraged to leave to be educated but that they wanted you to come back to serve in the community.

RS: Yes, they didn't realize what would happen.

MG: I'll ask more about that in a minute. But I wanted to also ask about your parents. They must have known each other growing up, but how did they then get together as a couple?

RS: They grew up together. But they went to different schools, which was interesting. There were many of these little one-room schools all over the place. I don't know why they had so many of them. But the dividing line happened to be the road that separated the two. So, my father went to one school called Beaver, and my mother went to another school called Meadowview. But they knew each other, of course. Then my mother went off during the war. The start of the war, she was off in Edmonton, so she wasn't around much, but they knew of each other. So, when she came back near the end of the war, my father was one of the few men around. We never talked about it. We never knew anything about their romance. They just were married. I was born a year later. That was life, you know?

MG: Being the first grandchild and living near your grandparents, did you have an opportunity to be close with your grandparents? What stories did they share with you?

RS: Most of them only spoke German, basically, and they told nothing. But I saw them all the time. The ones in town I saw almost every day. The ones on the farm I saw every week because since the farm schools only went to grade nine, my father only went to grade eight, and then he went back to work on the farm. If you wanted to go beyond grade nine, you had to come into the town. But to come into town, you had to live somewhere. So, my aunts and uncles would come and live with us, and they would come in on a Sunday afternoon from the farm. Then they would go to school during the week. Then the grandparents would come in on a Friday afternoon to take them back home to work. So, I saw my grandparents twice a week from the farm and then in town every day almost because we'd walk by their house to go to school, or I'd go to the shop where my grandfather and uncles worked. My sister would go – she took music lessons, and she would stop and have a meal at my maternal grandmother's all the time. And they would discipline you very much so. There was a famous word; they'd say, "*Bazoof*," which means "look up." If you didn't, they would come and twist your ear. I remember being twisted when I was in the shop a number of times because, for instance, I would take a plane, a wood plane, and I'd be making something, and then I'd lay the plane down with its blade down, unknowingly. You never do that with a plane because you hurt the blade. When my grandfather saw me do that, without a word, [he'd] just come and twist my ear. I only did that a few times. I still remember that. When I'm working with a plane, I remember having my ear twisted, and I always lay it correctly. I learned to do woodworking by osmosis [sic], I guess. I learned to be a welder, an ironworker. I still do a lot of work with wood. Let me show you some things I make now. These are little trains I make for kids. All the kids in the area have a train. I set up a system where they would come on a Saturday, and they would have to work for four Saturdays and make themselves a train. I made all different sizes, big ones –

MG: Oh, wow.

RS: We'd make really big ones, tall. So, kids, when they were toddlers, could hold them and walk. I've made over a hundred of these. I still make a few of them. But all the kids in the area have them, and there's not much need anymore. But I also give them now to old friends. They like them, and they give them to their children.

MG: My four-year-old daughter would be very impressed.

RS: We might arrange for one. It takes me a while to make one because there's a lot of prep work.

MG: Yes, I understand. You talked about your uncles in the service. Did they ever share any war stories with you?

RS: Never. When they came back, they came back in uniform, which was interesting. They brought back their backpacks and stuff. That's how I got backpacks and army stuff. They would never talk about the war. When people got together – I knew my uncle went in 1938 and came back in '46. He'd never come back in the meantime. He was a cook, so he was with the frontline troops in England for a long time because they just sat around in England for years, waiting to go overseas. Then, when they went in after D-Day, he went with the troops because, of course, the troops had to be fed. So, you were working with that all the time, and then he'd move with them. All he ever said was he was in France, Germany, Netherlands. Canadian troops were the ones that went into the Netherlands. I heard a little bit about that because other people in our town were also in the Netherlands. A lot of my uncles spoke German enough – so they had to go into Germany right away. One of them ended up staying there after the war, interrogating and interpreting the troops that were captured, and they were trying to select who the senior officers were hiding and stuff like that. Another uncle his job was to work – collecting all of the uniforms and guns and stuff. He said they collected uniforms and guns to fill huge storage areas for Germans. They had to get the guns out of the community. So, they'd do that. Another uncle didn't go to war. He was helping to build the Alaska Highway. They started in Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta. The US set up huge storage areas for CATs [Caterpillar] and equipment, and then they went north from there. So, he spent his time driving a CAT all the way up to Alaska. It took him two or three years, but he went crazy. I don't know why. A lot of them came back nutty, really, because nobody understood [PTSD]. You were a coward. So, you never talked about it, but you could see it in the community, just so many of them. Everybody except a few farmers and a few workers in town were in the military.

MG: Did this experience shape your attitude towards military conflict or influence your ideas maybe during the Vietnam War era?

RS: I was very anti-Vietnam War. I was in the US at the time, but I was a Canadian citizen. My number, had I been American, I'd be in the Vietnam War. I had a low number, but I was a Canadian. I always kept my passport and money, and a bag packed just in case. I was a little paranoid that I would be called up. A lot of foreigners did join to get citizenship. But I didn't get citizenship until many years later.

MG: I also was really curious about this blacksmith shop that your father had in town. It sounded like it was a real hub in the village and that he must have been connected to many people in the town.

RS: Not so many in the town, but the farmers who came into town, yes. They would come in and have coffee, and they'd sit around. In the evenings, after they're done work, they'd bring in something broken. That's why people had to work at night because a farmer couldn't afford [to

come] during the day – a farmer had chores. In the morning, every farmer had to feed the chickens [and] the turkeys; they milked the cows [and] fed the horses. That was two or three hours of steady work. Then you would do your farming work that you had to do – haying and other things like that. Then around 4:30 or five, you had to go get the cows, bring them in, and milk the cows again. Then you had to separate the milk from the cream because the only money you got was from selling eggs and cream. There was a creamery in town. So, every week, you'd bring in big barrels of cream, and you got paid cash right there. So, they had to come into town when they did that, and it was hard to come into town if you had a horse and buggy. Eventually, you had an old car. So, once you came into town, you made an important trip. You brought in your broken stuff. You came in after your chores. So, you came in at six or seven. So, then you went to the shop, and you had your horseshoes made and your broken things welded because you never had anything like that. So, you'd be there until ten or eleven, and you take that part and go back home. When I was very young, I'd go to the shop and watch my grandfather actually putting horseshoes on horses, the big Clydesdales. I have one of his horseshoes. He made it. It's about this big. But it's very interesting. When you have a big horse like that, you hold the hoof, and then you bring the horseshoe hot, red hot, and you burn it in, so it fits just right because the hoof melts a bit. Then you pound big nails in them, and these horses have hooves that are that thick. I'd watch – and stinky because there was hot stuff like that. The people who came in would, of course, expect a coffee, so they'd brew coffee in the shop and sit around and tell stories and lies and their hunting stories. Everybody hunted deer and hunted geese. We were on a flyaway so everybody would hunt geese and ducks, and those were kept frozen. You actually could take duck meat and can it in a big jar. So, they'd tell their stories about how big they shot and things like that. I'll tell you a story. During the Depression in the '30s, my father and grandparents were still living on the farm. They hadn't moved into the town yet. Things were really tough for the farmers because they had no money. My dad had a rifle, a .22, and he would go out into the coulees because they lived near a big river and shoot a deer occasionally out of season or whenever. The word got around that there was a poacher out in this area. So, the province sent out some police to catch this poacher. About that time, my father had shot a couple of deer, and he'd hauled them home. What he would do is shoot them and eviscerate them, and then tow them home, dragging them behind a horse – put a tie around the antlers and haul them back. He brought two home without telling his mother. He would never tell – the females lived a separate life from men. It's quite interesting. They never [said] anything against the men. They never had money. They never made decisions. So, he put these two out in a barn that was an old barn farther out on the farm. The police came, and she was home alone. They couldn't speak German, and she couldn't speak English. Somehow, they told her what they were looking for. She said, "Oh, no, no. Go look." So, they said, "Well, if she tells us to go out there and look ..." It was a windy day and yucky. So, they didn't go look. Otherwise, my dad would probably be in prison. But eventually, she found out what he'd been doing, and she put a stop to that. But they had to do that because there was just no food. The Depression and the Dust Bowl – it was the same in the US; it was the same in Canada. Things were really tough. So that's something that he did. My father would make his own bullets. He'd take the old cartridges and then reload them. He reloaded some little wrong once, and his gun blew up. So, half of his face was all screwed up. He had no teeth on his right side. Because when the bullet came out, it had gone right up in there, and so he was always disfigured. When he wanted to scare us when we were young, if we were bad, he'd open his mouth kind of like that, and you'd see all his

deformed teeth and jaw. He would never tell us how that happened. One of his younger brothers told us what had happened.

MG: It seems like a good way to teach your kid a lesson about being careful with guns.

RS: I had a gun at a very young age. Guns were used for hunting. You never thought to shoot people. We would take guns to school, loaded guns, shotguns, and .22s. So, at noon – and we were in a rural area. There was a small slough, and we would shoot at the ducks and the geese – or not the geese, but the ducks and the prairie chickens. We would take loaded guns to school. So, after school, we could go out shooting. Can you believe that? Kids twelve years old with a shotgun loaded. We put them in, and we had lockers at that time with a big case of shells. So, we were ready to go. Nobody ever thought of hurting a person with a gun. We were all very comfortable with guns. It was interesting. In the Royal Canadian Air Cadets, we also learned how to shoot. The farm kids in our group would just out-shoot the city kids, just hands down because we had so much experience. In the summer, we were shooting every day, and then in winter, we'd go shooting rabbits. There was a valley where we would put two or three boys at the front of the valley, and then the rest of us would go further out and start shooting. The rabbits would come out. Then we would get them, and then they would be eaten.

MG: During the depression or hard times, did it help to have such a huge family network in the area? It sounds like your family was a third of the population in Castor.

RS: Yes, we were about a third. Oh, yeah. Some of the colonies in other parts – near Edmonton, there was a large colony where it was much wetter. They would send potatoes down, big sacks of potatoes. They'd put them on the train and then send it to a town. My mom would tell me how important it was. They would go and get a couple of bags of potatoes from these people. Oh, yes. We would share meat. If somebody was down or somebody was hurt, there would be food. So as a whole community, there were very few people who were above or below; everything moved between it.

MG: I was curious if it was hard to date growing up because you didn't want to bump into a cousin.

RS: Dating was not a big deal in that respect. I did have an English girl, as they were called – girlfriend. We dated after I was able to drive. But unfortunately, that never worked out after we went to college, and she went to nursing school.

MG: What were family gatherings like for you? How did you manage with so many people?

RS: There were a lot of people. If we had family coming – oh, during Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter, we had a family gathering. So, let's just look at Christmas. Christmas Day, all of us would gather generally at a paternal or maternal grandparents' home – all the kids. You might have thirty-five to 45 people. How you fed them and how you ate was pretty interesting. They set up tables in the kitchen, in the living room, and any other room so everybody could eat at one time. But the kids were in one place. The older people were speaking German in another place, and then the in-betweens were speaking English at another

table. There would be a big noon meal. Then after that, the kids would go out and play, and the adults would sit around, talk and tell stories. Then there'd be another meal at dinner, everybody for dinner. Then some of them would have to go home for their chores, but the ones that would send a kid home, an adult kid to do the chores, then they would stay. So, at Christmas, we always had Christmas Day at one house. Then the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's, somebody else took the family. Then New Year's Eve, another family took – and then New Year's Day. So, we'd have four turkeys in that short period of time. Then, if everybody hadn't been accommodated, the next Sunday, another one we'd have. So, we were always together in either maternal or paternal groups like that. During the year, about every month, we would have another gathering like that. At the church, we would have a big gathering or with other families like that. So, you were constantly either entertaining or being entertained by somebody, and everybody had two big tables in their houses, a huge one in the kitchen and a different table in the living room – always – because you always had to use those tables. Then you had a portable table of some kind that you'd put up in another room.

MG: There was a story you shared in your interview with Sonja [Wolter], where you talked about how you only remember being reprimanded by your mother once. Can you tell me that story? Do you remember what I'm talking about?

RS: Yes, only spanked once. I was reprimanded, but I was only spanked [once] that I remember. We were living in town. There was a valley just to the north of us. Some kids, older English kids, as they're called – of course, the Germans wouldn't do this – started a little fire down in the valley, and wind took it, and it moved down the valley. There were people living at the top of the valley. It was approaching a house and a barn they had. It was so exciting. All the people were rushing over, and there was a fire engine, and people had pails. I was maybe three or four. I ran across and went over there and watched the fire. After a while, my mother looked around and couldn't find me. She finally figured it out. So, she went over and found me standing there watching the flames coming up. I remember when she got home – you know what a yardstick is? A wooden yardstick? She took that, and she paddled me and paddled me and told me never ever to do anything like that again. And I didn't. But within the family, you were rarely, rarely spanked. You were ear twisted – look how big my ears are. [laughter] – or you were scolded by an older person, generally a grandparent. They had the authority to scold you. It started out with “(Bazoof?),” which means “lookout,” and that was the signal that you turned and looked at them. You looked at them, and then they told you what you had done wrong and never to do it again. My grandmother would often say, “You can get a lot more in life with a little bit of sugar than with a lot of salt.” I remembered that. Be nice to people. Don't be bad. Don't be bad. That really helped me all the way in life. It was amazing. When I went to these interviews for the scholarships, the city kids – you could hear them being interviewed, a lot of them – they talked about such different things than the country kids did. They talked about going down to the store, buying a nice jacket, having all these records that they listened to, and going to parties with girls. I never even knew about that. [inaudible] we talked about working on the farm, visiting people, and having friends. That obviously helped a lot because I had more scholarships than I could use. I never paid for university after the first year. When I went to Wyoming, I bought a new house – a kid [in] college. I had all this money coming in. Why not? I bought a car, a brand-new car, and a house.

I rented out rooms with other people. I thought that's the way life was because I knew no difference.

MG: Which grandmother was it that gave you this advice?

RS: My paternal.

MG: What other tips did she give you? What other things did she share with you?

RS: Oh, she was always very nice to me, which always helped. No matter what problems we had and when things were tough, she was always smiley and very helpful. My maternal grandmother was a bit older than her. Of course, they were good friends. When I went to visit them on the farm, she had so many other kids on the farm because only my mother was married, and there were at least four aunts and three uncles living on the farm. The farm had three bedrooms. So, one bedroom was for men and one for women. They had double beds, and the kids would all sleep together. They'd have three big double beds, and all it was just in the room. Everybody would sleep together. So, she was always involved with the kids, so it was the uncles and aunts that would teach me a lot more things because it was an older family. They helped teach and bring you up completely.

MG: You mentioned you have a sister. Is she your only sibling?

RS: No, I have two sisters, one sister a year younger than me and one sister eight years younger. The older sister died a few years ago, and the younger sister is still living. She's a schoolteacher. She taught indigenous people and worked on Indian reserves and remote areas like that, teaching those children. She's retired. She's got grandchildren now.

MG: What was your relationship with your sisters like growing up?

RS: Very good. The sister that was just younger than me, we, of course, had to walk to school together. We would wait for each other to walk home at lunch. You went home [for] your lunch and back to school in the noon hour. Until I started working at the newspaper, being a printer, we would walk home together. There was a bit of competition with her. With the younger sister, I was so much older than her that I was in grade two, I think, when she was born. So, there was a very big difference. She was brought up completely differently than us older children. We were brought up with very strict rules and told what to do by our grandparents. But by her time, the grandparents were getting older. My grandmother on the maternal side had died. So, she never had that experience with the grandparents like we did. The church was starting to become very, very less important in people's lives. So, she grew up almost as the English kids, as we call them.

MG: What do you remember from the 1950s? I'm thinking about the Cold War and the polio epidemic.

RS: The polio epidemic. I got polio. I was paralyzed on my left side. I was put in the local hospital. There was a very early hospital, a huge hospital in town built by nuns from France. In

our town, there were three groups of people: the Germans, the French, and the English. We're all one-third, one-third, one-third. The French sent over nuns and priests to this frontier town – at the time, it wasn't even a town – and they built this huge hospital and staffed it with nuns. It's now a national monument because it was built huge and big. It's not used, of course, but it's being kept. So, I was put in this hospital, and the nuns were like the flying nuns; they had these big headdresses with white. They wore pure white things on the front. I was put in a room separate. I remember very vividly – I was only a few years old – the nuns looking in the window and then opening the door and coming in. I was so scared because this was worse than anything you ever saw at Halloween, and they wore masks. But after I was sent out of the hospital, I was semi-paralyzed, and my father bought me a little tricycle, a three-wheeler. In our house, you could go around. There was a central part of the house. Then there was a corridor all around. He made me ride that bike every day for hours, and that helped somehow to get my paralysis out. I was a little paralyzed on my left. When I used to smile at school, it was visible but that disappeared. So, I had no other effects from that. A lot of kids died in the '50s, farm kids because there weren't many kids in town. But you'd hear, "Oh, somebody-somebody (Schultz) died last week from polio." That was it.

MG: Do you know how you contracted it? Tell me a little bit more about the recovery? How old were you when this happened?

RS: I think I was about two and a half to three in that period. I contracted it from water, I think, out at the farm. It was in the summer. I was at my maternal grandparents' farm. I got a fever, and I remember them putting me in a car. They had a car. The grandfather couldn't drive, so one of the young uncles drove. A couple of the aunts held me in the back seat. I remember laying out between them because I was quite sick. They took me directly to the hospital. In those days, the hospital and doctors and things were kind of interesting also. I dislocated my arm playing basketball in school one day, so I just got out of school, told the teacher goodbye, and I walked to the doctor's office, never told my parents. He said, "You got to have that set tomorrow morning. Go to the hospital." I walked into the hospital, got a room, settled in, and then – there [weren't] phones much. I got somebody to go tell my parents that I was in the hospital and I was going to be operated on in the morning. They came up the next morning to see how it went. And I'd had an outgrown tooth here. I asked the doctor, "While I'm under anesthesia, please take that tooth out," and he did. Here I was in the morning, coming out of anesthesia, and my parents came to see me. And I was bleeding on my mouth because I had the tooth pulled out, and I had my arm in a cast. "Oh, hi. Okay." The doctor knew us personally. It was like that. It was so different like that. I don't know whoever paid for it. But there probably was not even a charge for all that. I was named after that doctor that did that. His name was Russell. He was my mother's doctor when she gave birth. So, they couldn't think of a name, so they just called me after him.

MG: He sounds like a doctor who did lots of different kinds of things.

RS: Everything. In those days, they did operations in the morning, and in the afternoon, they had visits. It was incredible. I mean, a lot of the patients, of course, would die and stuff like that. Death was all over the place. It was not a big deal. I remember one of my younger sister's friends had a tonsillectomy. Everybody got tonsils in those days out and an appendix. I didn't,

luckily, because my parents wouldn't pay for it. But she died from her tonsillectomy. There were no lawsuits or anything. "That's the way things go."

MG: What other memories stand out to you from growing up in this area?

RS: Every day was a memory. One that's quite interesting was, as kids, we would always be out in the outdoors, never indoors in the summer because we were so cooped up in winter. A group of us went out to – about six miles from town, there was a canyon, a very steep canyon where water had cut through the canyon, and we would go swimming there. Well, not really swimming because it was only three feet deep and cold water. But we went out there. Most of us were relatives or scouts. We had a bonfire. It was noon. So, we made a fire and roasted wieners and ate the wieners. But then, in those days, there was this idea that you couldn't go into the water or swim for a whole hour after you ate; otherwise, you'd get cramps. So, we waited an hour. Then, of course, we went into the water naked because we didn't have swimsuits and [we're] just boys, twelve years old, ten years old, something like that – a whole range of us. But when we were walking through the water, we could feel round things on the bottom of the mud. So, we would feel these things and pick them up, and they were rounded and solid, really heavy. They were iron. So, I took one of those home. Just a minute. Sorry, I had to go find one of them. So, these are the things that we would find. You see?

MG: Yes, it's amazing.

RS: We thought that these were petrified buffalo hearts. It looks like a heart. Young kids – we didn't know much. Other kids said it was petrified turnips. Other older boys said, "No, that's a petrified Indian maiden breast." You see, they have little holes in the end there. Eventually, I took one of these home, a bigger one than this. When my parents died, I cleaned up the house, and I found it. I took it to a university. They come in different sizes; here's a smaller one. I tried to find out what it was. I sent a picture to a museum, a paleontology museum, and they said, "That's probably an artifact, not important," but I knew it wasn't something like that. So eventually, after a year or two, the museum sent somebody out to our town to see these things. So, I gathered a bunch of cousins and others, about eight or ten of us, and we went out there to revive sixty years ago when we found these things. And eventually, we found some of these. The paleontologists said, "I'd like to see where these things are actually in the wall." So, we found a place where they were in the wall. But we always thought that they were formed like this. But, in the wall, they were formed like this. Eventually, long story short, there was a worm living in the sea at that time. You can see that in the end there. The worm would live in the mud on the seashore, come out, grab food, and then go back into the mud, eat it, and then poop it out. It would push it out, and eventually, it had this cone of feces around it. Then when freshwater brought iron in, the iron went into the feces, of course, and changed and made it into a fossilized worm poop. There are only two places in the world those are found.

MG: Where's the other place?

RS: In Japan. They're much smaller. Well, these are small. We found some that are huge. Anyway, whenever I go back, my younger sister and I go out there; we don't tell people where this is. All the locals know, but the museum and some of the other people at the university want

to know where it is, but we won't tell them because they'll come and take them all. So, in the community, we know where they are, but nobody [else does]. One of the reasons we don't tell these people is that some fifteen years before, in this area, we found a huge ammonite that was about three and a half feet across. Do you know an ammonite? Let me show you. This is a small ammonite.

MG: Oh, wow.

RS: They're an old kind of shellfish, and they lived in the ocean. We found one that was three feet across. So, we told the museum about it, and they came and took it. So, we won't tell them where these – we know a number of places where there are fossilized snails. We also found a bed of fossilized snails. They want to know where those are because instead of being curled clockwise, they're curled anti-clockwise. That's very, very rare. I don't know if I you see this, but that's anti-clockwise. It's a snail.

MG: I see it, yes.

RS: And it's coiled anti-clockwise. They're desperate; they want to know where this is, but we won't tell them because they'll come and steal them all. So, there are only about four people, five people who know about this. My daughter and I found this place because we were looking for fossils. We found this little bed of anti-clockwise curled snails. But the reason that we wouldn't tell them is because they stole that big ammonite. But the story continues. After a few years, I got a little incensed about that, so an aunt and I separately wrote letters to the museum and said, "Please return it." We never heard anything for about a year. But a year later, here comes a truck – these things weigh about a ton. A truck came, and they had made a facsimile of it. You couldn't tell the difference. In museums, those dinosaurs you look at rarely are full bones; they have to make a replica because it's so heavy. The same thing with the ammonite they made, and now it's in our local museum. It's huge and beautiful.

MG: Is there a more elegant name than petrified worm poop for those things?

RS: It's called *Rosselia* or something. Yes, there is a name, but I don't use it. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] And how old would you say that they are?

RS: They know they're seventy million years old. That's when the seashore was there. Then, when it eroded, the land rose up so that the water cut through the rising land. These things are so heavy, they [went] down, and the only place you find them was where the bedrock is. So, it's a very narrow area where there's bedrock. There are probably many, many more of these up and down, but they're sunk in the bottom where you'll never find them. But there's just a place where the bedrock is, and they stopped there. That's where we happened to be walking through.

MG: Did any of the other boys on this adventure take some home as well?

RS: Oh, yeah. That's where some of them called them petrified turnips and stuff. Yes, we all had them. But we didn't know what they were; they were kind of a neat novelty. But then when

we went and found out what they really were, we collected a bunch and gave them to friends and family. They're neat pieces. What I do now is I – these are small ones. I can't find my big one. I make little holders for them and give them away to people as something to talk about.

[laughter]

MG: [laughter] Part of the story also was that you made a connection with a professor who happened to be nearby, and this is his expertise. Who was that?

RS: Again, wait a minute, and I'll tell you his name. He's a professor of geology at the University of Alberta. I wrote a little article. I might have sent it to you. Did I?

MG: You did. It was interesting.

RS: Yeah. His name is in there. Murray Gingras. I met him once. He was very busy one day. I was at the university. The university gave me an honorary doctorate at some point. I was in Edmonton. I went to visit him, but he was very busy, and so was I, but I showed him some of them, and ours were so much bigger than what they find in Japan. Ours are huge, he said. But that was one of his – he does other things, but he is one of the people who study these things. Not many people study them because there are not very many of them. But he's the one that showed me how they lived in the ocean. I think I sent you that, where you can see they lived under the mud. You can see. There's the form they are in.

MG: It's incredible.

RS: Just like that picture.

MG: It must have been so exciting for a kid who was very interested in science to have found this scientific artifact.

RS: At that time, we'd find all kinds of things. We found these when we were kids, ammonites. We'd find the snails. Another kid specialized in finding dinosaur bones. He's actually got a foot of a dinosaur. Because in this area, nobody ever thought – the professionals never came to dig up stuff, so the stuff was laying all over the place. On the day that we did find these, on the way back to town, we had found a cow that had died about a week or two before. We went out to see what the cow's carcass looked like now. When we got there, the coyotes had taken and entered the anus, and they had eaten everything else inside. So, here's this cow laying there with its legs and skin, all bloated with a huge opening in the back. So, one of the little kids with us wanted to be part of the big group. We were kind of nasty. Older kids would beat up on younger kids, and younger kids would pull tricks on the smaller ones. It was a constant thing like this. We convinced the younger kid he could join our group if he crawled inside the cow carcass just like a coyote would. So, he did. Once he got inside, we took sticks and beat on it just like a drum and scared the hell out of him. We still laugh about that. He's still around. [laughter]

MG: Poor kid. Dr. Schnell, I realize we're never going to get through what I wanted to get through today. So, I'm wondering if this is a good place to take a break, and we can pick up here another time.

RS: Sure. It's your schedule. I'm more or less retired. So, I have a lot of spare time.

MG: Great. Well, this has been delightful so far. How about I send you an email with some possible dates to do this again?

RS: Okay.

MG: Okay. Well, thanks so much for your time. This has really been a lot of fun.

RS: How did you keep your daughter busy this time?

MG: She's in school today. She's in preschool. All right. Have a great weekend. I'll be in touch soon.

RS: Thank you. Bye.

MG: Bye-bye.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/6/2022

Reviewed by Russell Schnell 6/27/2022

Reviewed by Molly Graham 12/31/2022