

# Consent Form

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Signed

AW. Ewing  
 interviewee

Signed

Neil Burns  
 interviewer

Date

May 9/79

## Regional History.

May 1979

Mr. Alton W. Ewing  
Neil Burns.

Side A

- 0 - 20 - background (joined army but was discharged)
- 20 - 40 - CPR wasn't hiring people who were eligible for going overseas
- general feelings on WW II
- personal feelings.
- work on monthly basis (paid every 2 weeks)
- 40 - 50 - overseas servicemen lived it up because they didn't know if they would be around the next day
- heard of outbreaks when working at Bruck Mills
- 45 ⇒ - role of radio throughout war.
- 50 - end - family members in war
- living conditions
- prices of food
- coupons (ration booklets)
- black market (especially overseas)
- most missed his friends

Side B.

- 0 - 10 - sense of pulling together
- how ones were treated who hid in woods.
- used sugar arch for heat & cooking
- 10 - 20 - treatment when caught
- wacs, wrens
- 20 - 30 - end of war (jubilation)
- troops coming home
- 30 - 35 - POW camps (Sherbrooke, Farnham)
- many ex-prisoners came back to live
- 35 - 50 - compulsory education
- wages
- Bartering (generations before)
- (pioneers)
- general history of Island Brook

Interviewee- Mr. Alton W. Ewing

Interviewer- Neil Burns

O.K. So were you in the Eastern Townships during the war?

Partially, for the first two years I was in and around Sherbrooke until the end of '42. From 1940 to '42 I was in Lennoxville and Sherbrooke. I lived in Lennoxville on Lawrence Street and my first boy was born in Sherbrooke while I was living there, Larry, my oldest son. I quit Warner Transport to join the army. I went to Montreal to join the army on Gregg Street. After being with them for four months, I was discharged for medical reasons so then I worked for the CPR at security during the rest of the war years.

Where was this?

We worked out of Windsor Street station in Montreal.

So you were working all over the place?

Yeah, I was working in all the terminals in Montreal where they had cargo going overseas you know and we had to protect that cargo from theft and whatever you want to call it - pilferage - because it was yards full of all kinds of materials going overseas you know. Big terminals like Outrement and Ven and Place Vegé. So us fellows we had we were on shifts working all hours.

It was an around the clock watch?

Yeah, because there was so much goods being shipped overseas to the troops you know that the yards were full of all sorts of materials from tobacco, cigarettes, alcohol, beer, meat, and weapons of all sorts and aircraft guns, tanks. We had to

guard that stuff and watch it on terminals before shipment you see and it wasn't harmed in any way or destroyed or you know.

That was supplies for the services?

Yeah.

Do you mind telling me your name and place of birth?and date?

I was born right here in Island Brook on March the 27th 1916. All my early years I spent here in Island Brook until I was about 16 going on 17 I left Island Brook. During depression years there was no money here so I had a chance to go to Cowansville and have a steady job making a little salary. It wasn't much, but better then it was in the farming area at the time.

Your martial status is... Your married now?

Oh yes I'm married oh yes. I have two sons and one daughter and they are all married.

Could you tell me a little bit about your family background?

What sort of family ...

Well, my mother and father of course I was born here on the farm and they were just like most of the people in Island Brook. They didn't have much money you know. We worked hard for a living. Why everybody was happy in this town at the time even if we were all poor I might say. We didn't lack from being happy because everybody was happy during the depression days even though they didn't have no money. I think they were more happy then they ever were are today, because they didn't know what the good life

was really I mean as far as money is concerned. They couldn't go out and buy this and that. They got along with what they had on the farm. They lived off the farm. We my mother and father used to enjoy having people come into their home and kitchen dances because my father was an old time fiddler and my sisters two of them could play the organ. We had two organs in the house, you know, these old time organs. So we all made our own music. I even played a mouth organ and a little bit of the guitar and my brother played a harp and every night after supper we'd before the chores were finished off we'd have a real round of music and that was right after supper and we were really happy in those days. Although it was a very difficult time really not having enough money to buy the world of goodies you would like to have, but we were happy. We had to walk to school from up here you know it is over a mile down to Island Brook. Earl Dawson and I we walked to school together every morning because we were about the same age. We were in the grade. Froze our toes, froze our ears for near every other morning when it was cold.

What was your work during the war?

Well, as I say, the first part of the war I was on transport from Sherbrooke to Montreal for C.C. Warner then I left him to join the army which wasn't the best move thing I ever made because I didn't realize I had any medical handicap which turned out to be just my varicose veins in my legs which caused me to have an honorable discharge from the army you know not

causing me to go overseas. I joined active service on Gregg Street in Montreal, but I wanted to go over in the worst way but that's the way it turned out. So after that I was with the CPR after I got my discharge papers I got a job with the CPR as a security officer because they knew I would be with them until the end of the war if I wanted to be because they were very They weren't taking on anybody that was eligible for service you know because they just get them trained and they would have to they'd be taken away from them and so they were taking fellows that weren't going overseas at the time and that's about the size I can remember the war starting very vividly today and when it ended too. It was all radio of course. There was no T.V. in those days. I heard it on the news and I heard everything else on the news on radio. When the war ended the jubilation of it all and ...

What aye how did it affect people when it started? How did it feel?

Well, they really felt quite badly about it. As I recall they'd already gone through one, the first world war you know, and just barely got over that one and another one appeared over the horizon aye so they didn't feel very happy about it. There was no happiness about it. It was they knew right well that a lot of the young people would be going again. It's quite a hard thing to take. When families are split up. It's very difficult for people. A lot of people of course had quite a few in the family go in the service not only one some of them had four or five

you know and when only one or two came back it's pretty hard.

They could be very discouraging.

Yep.

In what way did it most affect you?

Well, I suppose it affected me in this way. I it was a worry to me like anyone else I suppose, but the worst thing about it was the salaries were still low during the war. We weren't making big money you know and just squeaking by and that was it you know. If you couldn't make enough money in one week to pay your rent you almost had it because that's the way it was in the cities. You figured if you couldn't make enough money in one week to pay your rent you weren't going to have any money left over at the end of the month because we were working on a monthly basis. We weren't working on a by the hour as today. Pretty near all monthly work.

You paid so much for monthly work?

Yeah, so much a month. That's about the way it was in those days. They got paid every two weeks in the factories in Montreal and a lot of us well most of us got paid every fifteen days, but we were hired on a monthly basis you know. Otherwards we had to have a months notice before anyone could lay us off if we were working for a large company or we had to have a month's notice and if we were leaving, we had to give them the same notice and work our month out you know. We couldn't quit on a weekly basis.

Like not coming in ...

No no you couldn't do that and aye cuz it's not like it is today. People control the companies today, companies have no more control today. Large companies they'd probably you know as well as I do your young, but you probably read about it. We weren't very few people were unionized during the war a few you know, but it wasn't strong unions. Not like it is today so the companies didn't put up with all this nonsense of you telling them what you thought and running off at the mouth you know what I mean. If you had anything to discuss that the company was going to benefit by well they'd take you into the office and if you had a good point well, of course, they'd see to it that you got a probably a raise or a better job out of it if you had something to offer the company. But you couldn't go around running off at the mouth and telling them that you didn't like this and that you didn't like that. They'd lay you off or fire you, and there was no union to protect you. So if you wanted to hold your job, you did your job and took orders from your foreman or your boss and that was it. Not like it is today. Employees really had a hard time during the war because they had to work they were working 24 hours a day in shops all over the country. There was no holidays, they worked Sunday too. Yeah.

That's a big change.

Seven days a week, and you probably had one day off in two weeks for a weekend say one every second week you probably would have a day, but there was no fooling around during the war years they



had to get things done and done quick aye. There was no one coming up and telling the company that they didn't know what they were doing or they just bloody well had to go to work and work hard. Because they had to win a war and there were no two ways about it. Everybody's mind was on winning the war if you get me everybody. I don't think there was less than 5% that didn't have their mind on the war. Everybody was talking about the war and getting it done and getting it over with, but it took six years you know the last war. It was a long long time.

It's a long time.

A long long time, but you today it would be you know you think of it and it's a long time in your lifetime. You see you friends go away and see in six years later and you hardly know them aye they're changed so. And a lot of them never get over it aye they Some remain there for the rest of there lives.

A lot of them never got over it. They always ended up with some sort of a degree of instability or I don't think it was always the fault of the war you know because that you know it was a new way of life for a lot of young people and they they just didn't know when they might loose their life so they lived it up they had a good time out of it. Even when they got overseas there was big parties, big times they lived it up because they might go out tomorrow and be killed. That's the way they looked at it you know. Fellows in the Air Force and the front lines they lived it up every night they had a chance because they didn't

figure they would come back alive you know.

Do you remember what you were doing when the war started? Like when you first heard.

Yeah when I when we first heard the news I was working in the Bruck Textile mills in Cowansville. I was running operating a the first printing machine they had in that shop at the time. A big plant even today. Them days most of their goods were hand printed, what we call screen printing. They start out with a two man screen and ended up with a one man screen. They were very hard to handle on the table you know. They lay their goods out on table and print it in different colors and hang it up to dry. But I was on a printing machine when the war broke out and I can recall it very vividly when the war broke out in 1939. I think it was in October or September. It was in the Fall anyway. I think I'm not sure I can't hardly remember now, but it affected us all very much at the time cuz we didn't know really what to do. Everybody around where I was living pretty much everybody went willingly. They didn't have to be conscripted you know. They just went and joined. Some of them were discharged early same as I was, but most English speaking people that is they they all joined the army right away within the first year practically.

You told me you heard it by radio. What sort of a role did radio play during throughout the war?

Oh a very big role. Moreso then the newspapers because we used to people used to listen for the Bridge Broadcasting Corporation

(BBC) during those days for their reports direct from London, England aye. We got it you might say from the horses mouth what was going on. Of course, we couldn't prove things were happening as they were, but we took their word for it you know. Of course, they probably didn't tone it down too much because they knew they were having a hard time. They would have had to have help right away aye. So they up graded it all the time you know to make it sound worse probably then what it was. But it was really bad for them over there and we had all most all our news we got direct from London, England during the war and I think that was our best source of news at that time was about the war was direct from London, England. The same thing would be probably published in the Montreal Star the next day or so, but we got it by radio. Our ears were glued to the radio every chance we had you know.

Did you have any family members or relatives that had joined the war?

Yes, oh yes. My oldest brother was in most of the war and my I had a brother-in-law who was a prisoner of war in Hong Kong, and he died just recently and I had a cousin in Hong Kong that died over there. First cousin. I had a first cousin that was killed in Sicily coming up through Italy before they got into Italy and many more relations, but not close you know.

So it had very special meaning to you?

Oh yeah! And I had a lot of friends that never came back. Friends in Cowansville that was my own age probably meant just

as much to me as a brother or a sister you know because I was we were together and I grew up in Cowansville probably more than I did in Island Brook because I was a teenager when I got to Cowansville aye. I was like you and I was with all the young people and got to be friends with everybody down there and, of course, all them partically all them boys and girls there joined they joined the services. A lot of them never came back. So it had quite an impact on me personally. Yeah.

What were living conditions like? Like how did buying habits change and ...

Oh yeah yes. Buying habits changed a lot because goods that we were getting freely started to disappear from the market aye and there were rations hard to get prices went up, but nothing like we have today. Prices in those days we thought it was terrible, but they weren't terrible at all when you come to think of it. When we could get two pounds of hamburger for a quarter good hamburger and what you pay today that gives you an idea what prices were down. Milk was eight and nine cents a quart in Cowansville, but prices did go up but not that much not as much as they have recently. But we thought it was awful when our sugar was rationed and our butter was rationed. Coffee was rationed, tea was rationed. A lot of our things that we took for granted was rationed you know and we had to have coupons to show when we went to the store so we could get. If we used all our coupons up well then we had it until the next month.

How often did you get coupons? And how did you?

Well, if I remember rightly they they we had to a quota for a month I think they were rationed like for one month at a time and then you got a new supply at the end of each month. If you used them all up in the first week of each month, well then you had to wait aye.

Starve.

Yeah, you had to more or less spread that out over a period of time or else you would be going without. Luxuries we called them in those days you know. I suppose the same thing happened today probably would be much worse, but back in those days people who were just coming out of a bad depression and they didn't look at it as being anything out of the way to go without something because we were used to going without things you know. Now today the same thing hit you today you'd mind an awful lot I think.

It would be quite a

Cuz you had luxuries that we never dreamt of having at all. Supposing you were rationed now and couldn't get gas for your car you'd find that quite a big item right there.

It would hit me very hard.

And it could happen to you know.

Very well happen.

I don't remember gas was rationed during the second world war, but  
Was there such a thing as a black market or a ...

Oh yeah, the black market was something that has been with us

for years. It exists even today, but in those days it was worse then it is now because like overseas the boys that went overseas they were having things sent to them like candy and cigarettes and chocolate bars and all kinds of knitted goods like gloves and mits and sweaters and they'd sell them over there for a big huge amount of money at that time because people over there just couldn't get things like that. So we called that the black market aye. They were selling this stuff to the citizen of the country they were occupying at the time the war was going on. Those people never seen a chocolate bar for years. Some of them never had a cigarette you know for a long time. So they'd sell their cigarettes for or exchanged them for something they wanted you know that's the way..

One person that I've interviewed she said that they used cigarettes just like money quite often.

Oh yes it was a trade more. It wasn't always sold for money it was exchanged for something else you know. They had something to trade probably. Maybe they had a bottle of wine cuz that was a big wine country Europe aye. The boys they liked wine they liked to have something to drink. If they were out in the country and they couldn't get their wine or beer or something these people on the farms would have wine but they didn't have no cigarettes aye so they traded cigarettes for a bottle of wine and so on for a chicken. The troops would go for days without having any chicken or something so the boys used to trade cigarettes for chicken. They'd kill the chickens

and cook them aye in their camp or things like that you know. Little pig or anything to get something different to eat. They were used to eating ... beef and all kinds of canned stuff aye in the army and they found it a big treat to trade cigarettes with these people and get something fresh to eat like chicken or pork or

It's a real treat.

Yeah.

What sort of things did you most miss?

Well, I suppose the things I missed the most was my friends you know. Well, money you don't think about it in the same way as you do a friend aye. Doesn't matter how much money you get. Probably if you were to go through this you'd understand it probably better, but when you get notified that your friend has been shot down over the water or over a burning city at night and they can't recall.

It's come to the end of this.

That's O.K. it will go for a while yet. You gotta cut it shorter you know I talk to much.

Oh this just like what I want. It makes it much easier when you carry on the questions.

Well, I feel relaxed. I mean I don't mind because I know a lot of people don't like interviews. They don't like to be interviewed.

Yeah I've noticed a few of mine they are quite up tight.

I don't mind. I'm brave glad to have somebody like you do and find these things out because I think a lot of young

people don't realize what people went through you know.

... I better turn this over because see it is near the end.

That's O.K. Did you sense a sort of pulling together like national unity with everybody?

During the war?

During the war.

Oh yes, yes. Very much so. Very much. It was terrific I'm telling you how everybody pulled their weight. Everybody was involved let's put it that way. Very few ... one that was shirking their job duty well you know who they were aye. They go off and hide somewhere or to get out of it you know.

Well that's why the conscription crises came in.

Yeah yes in 1942. But everybody pulled their own weight and put everything into it. I remind you I think everybody had a good time out of it too. I never see to many that weren't happy doing it to you know.

How did like people that sort of just went off and sort of left things, how were they treated by other people that felt strongly for supporting the war and getting it over?

You mean the ones who tried to get out of going in the service.

Yeah. How were they treated by other people?

Well, they weren't respected very highly of let me tell you because most of them they were people we knew aye. Citizens that knew one another. They didn't like it very much when these boys who well there were men going would take off into the woods or go and hide somewhere and try to get out of going



to in the army like the other boys did you know. They weren't thought of very highly at the time, but after it was all over of course they got right back into the main stream of things and it was all forgotten about. At the time they didn't think very much of it let me tell you. They the people in the area would even try to help the police catch these fellows.

Oh some did.

Oh yes. They knew where they were hiding you know. Sometimes they were in some farmers sugar house hiding or using their sugar arch and the wood in his sugar house to keep warm with in cold weather. Yeah they were even caught doing that. Using the guys sugar rig to they had it fixed into a stove aye. They saw smoke blowing out of the chiminey of the camp that's stove they put the stove pipes up so they could use it aye. They didn't use the evaporator that they made sugar with but they put tin over it so the flames would go back and up through the pipes and they cooked on it and everything like that.

This would be a small finishing off arch?

Yeah well sugar well even the larger ones they put they found something to cover the parts that the evaporator is set on and they'd use the front part of it to cook on. And finally they would get caught because somebody who would see smoke way up in the woods aye would go to investigate and they find it was occupied by two or three sometimes more of these guys aye.

How were they treated once they were caught? What would happen to them?

Well, of course when they were caught up with by the police, they were given two choices aye. The rule either they join the army or else they would be incarcerated aye. So usually rather than go to jail they would join the service, but not active service they would always tried to join something that they thought they would never get going overseas in aye. They joined the service, but you had when you joined the service you had a paper to fill out and you could join either for active service or for service for your country. That meant two different ways. You could stay in Canada and still be in the army but not in active service you see overseas. Active service that was overseas stuff aye.

What sort of things did they do here if they didn't go overseas?

What sort of things were they involved with?

Well, they had huge army camps for instruction all over the country you know and they these people would train they would go in training like ordinary soldiers and then they would get a commission probably for being an officer of this or that and train other men and maybe they'd be in the service for supply in this country aye. That meant helping to deliver the goods to the trains or the ships for overseas. Service men did all these jobs. They used to load ships even at night. Service men and women even women that was in uniform they were working too to put cargo on ships at night. Wacs they called them aye in the army now in the Air Force it was different, but in the army they called Wacs. Waac wasn't it Women's Auxiliary oh

Women's Army Auxiliary Corp something like that.

I don't really know what it is. I've heard the term before.

Yeah, now in the Navy they called them Wrens. Now in the Air Force they called their was a different name for them in the Air Force and I can't recall it right now.

Do you remember how you first heard of the end of the war and how did it what sort of effects did it have on you?

Well, I guess it had the same effect on me it had on most people you know when we heard the war was over, I heard it on the radio at four o'clock in the morning, and of course it had already been over for quite a number of hours before we got it you see, but when we heard about it there was a lot of jubilation and what not you know. We were pretty happy it was over with. It was quite a long drawn over period you know.

And I suppose it was almost as bad waiting for the overseas people to come back too aye?

Well, yes we knew there was a lot of them we weren't gonna see again that's what made it kinda hard. We go to the train to meet the trains that were coming home the troop trains aye. They got off at Halifax it was a rule. That's before the seaway was built you know and most of them were coming into Halifax and getting off and they'd come through on troop trains. They'd come right through Cookshire you know from Halifax you see. They were coming right down the line through Scottstown, Bury, and right down through Sherbrooke, Montreal. They were getting

off at well most of them had to go right through to Montreal to get their discharge a lot of them the biggest part of them had to go some of them got their discharge in their own home town but not always.

Even if say somebody from Cookshire couldn't just get off there?

No, no they were in a service regiment that they joined the regiment it was more or less trained in the Montreal area they had to go back there to get their discharge you know. Sherbrooke was a lot of them got their discharge right in Sherbrooke too. There were Sherbrooke regiments you know. Sherbrooke ... there was Sherbrooke Blackwatch.

I think my uncle was in one of the Sherbrooke regiments.

So them troops would get their discharge here in the city of Sherbrooke you know.

Do you know of any POW camps around this area?

Well, there was one in Sherbrooke. You know as your going down to Sherbrooke from Lennoxville we used to be able to look right across the river and there was a big one there on the outskirts of Sherbrooke which is built up today. There was a big one there and there was another one down in Farnham area. I don't know much about them because I wasn't involved with any of that you know. But we would hear about all this going on. Prisoners being brought back here and we used to see them being unloaded and taken to the ...

What sort of a feeling did it give you to know that there were prisoners near?

Well, I don't know when you saw them they looked like any other ordinary guy in the service aye and you couldn't hate them really. I didn't hate them you know you felt sorry for them really. And most of them a good share of them that came over here and was here most of the time a lot of them were here four or five years you know in prisons. After the war they came back to Canada to live because they liked the people here you know. They were treated well I guess. They must have been because they came back here to live and I met quite a few in my years working around the country and their all were all nice and became good citizens and highly respected. Raised families and ... They were told what to do in their country so they were doing what they were told by superiors you know.

I understand it was during this period that education became compulsory. How did that change things?

Well, I guess that was a good thing really because when I went to Cowansville to work there was in the plants in Cowansville there was lots of kids working that wasn't even 15 years old. Now French families had quite a few children aye and they take them out of school early and get them a job in the shop or mill and three or four would be working in one out of one family for Bruck Mill or ... Company. And, of course, finally that came to an end they had to go to school aye til a certain age. I guess that's a good thing in a way. I know they wouldn't do it today because I think most young people would rather get an education today then not. During depression days of course that's the way

big families lived. They all worked for a few cents an hour. They got a lot of them only got 10 or 12 cents an hour when they start in the Bruck mills. I started at 16 cents an hour. Worked hard too 10 hours a day. And I had to I couldn't afford to hire a taxi to go to work so I walked the sidewalk from where I was living for two miles to get to work in the morning and walk home at night. Sidewalk all the way ,but I lived in Sweetsberg and I had to work in Cowansville and it was about two miles from where I was living. Didn't have no car and I couldn't even afford a bicycle. Sixteen cents an hour pay your board. Board was six dollars a week seven had to clothe yourself. Work six day hours a week and we used to work overtime. We got a little extra for overtime, but if we were on the day shift and say we worked til 10 o'clock at night the two or three hours overtime would give us two cents more. It wasn't much but ...

It helped then.

Our weekly pay check wasn't very big. Under twenty dollars a week.

Some difference from now.

Well, people I don't know I think young people should realize how how you know just how little people had to work for and the generations before me worked for less then that.

Yēah.

Can you imagine our fine of this country here. They never knew what money was hardly. Because when I was born people were

trading it was all barter aye. You take eggs down to a store and trade them in for groceries aye or you trade a farmer would take a load of wood and trade it in for some groceries. There was no money involved aye.

Very seldom would somebody go and buy something. It was trading.

Trading yeah. The general store was a trading post in the area. Right in Island Brook years ago we had the town was bigger then then it is today quite a lot bigger. We have two stores today we used to have a post office right here in Island Brook we had we used to have we never were less then two stores sometimes it was three and most of them burnt down. Most of the buildings in Island Brook of course isn't here today it burnt down. Probably father could tell you about that.

Oh yes.

I could take you down through and point practically a town. The town hardly exists today what there used to be you know.

There used to be a creamery, a sawmill.

Yes, we even had a cheese factory there one time and we had a big sawmill. We had a big hill pond that run up around ... and road up the brush ... and we got the highway going right across.

Going right across where it was, yeah.

And we at one time there was threemills in Island Brook beside the big saw mill. Big board mill. There was a clapboard mill and a shingle mill down the river down where Leslie McCloud lives.

Oh yeah.

Down along there there was mills. And aeh this town was booming when I was walking to school. They used to blow the whistle ant twelve o'clock and they blew it at seven in the morning. You could hear that whistle all over the country. We went by that whistle, we didn't have no watches so we used to go by the whistle us kids going to school you know. When we heard the seven o'clock whistle well we knew we had to start going to school to get there for eight o'clock aye. And the whistle blew at twelve and blew at one and then it blew at six o'clock again at night. Steam you know it would make a lot of noice. Steam whistle. Yeah you could hear that for a long long way that whistle. It was quite an active place here at one time of course. It wasn't only farming it was noted for its wood products aye.