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Signed

interviewee

S. S. Ayer

Date

April 25 / 79

Signed

interviewer

Kevin Toot / Ken Allan

Interviewee- Mr. S. J. Sayer. He was a guard at the Newington
POW camp.

Interviewer- Kevin Frost

When did you come over to Canada?

1908. We landed in Sherbrooke in March 1908. I was born
on the 4th of August 1900. So when the first world war
started I was just 14 years of age. That's a long time ago
let's get off of that. I follow the year August the 4th, 1900.
You were living in the Eastern Townships during the period
of 1939 to 1945?

All my life I've lived around Sherbrooke.

You were married at that time?

Yes, I was married in 1920.

Did-you have a family- like- were you bringing up any children
during the war?

Yes. I had two girls and two boys. One of the boys, the eldest,
was killed in 1938 on a road accident. Oh yes, I had two girls
and two boys. I still have two girls and two boys living today.
But, my youngest boy was born in 1942.

What was you occupation during that time during the war?

I was working for the Dominion Textile. I started there I might
as well say just before the war started.

Had the depression ended for you when the war started or ...?

No, you see I was ... Let's see now the depression started in
1929 aye. Well, I was working on the Quebec Central Railroad

and of course the railroads was having hard times. Business was not so good. We depended mostly on pulp wood hulling and in 1932 the Quebec Central Shops had to fail up because not enough revenue coming in. So at that time everybody was working at the shops at Newington. You know where Newington is. The shop slows down and some of the fellows been working in 1915 to 1932 ... shops shut off. There were taken over by the CPR (Canadian Pacific). But, my seniority wasn't big enough or high enough for me to go there, so I was laid off. So for three years I didn't work. And then by chance I happened to get into the Dominion Textile.

Did the railway station down at Newington what did they do with those after when they closed up?

Well, they went in for some ... I think took one of the stations over at Newington raising chicks. He gave that up after a while, when the shops really belonged to the city of Sherbrooke. So they took them over for storage place and repair shops for their maintenance of road vehicles.

Do you remember anything about the Newington POW camp they had there?

Oh there, I was in charge of 52 German prisoners. I worked in carpenter department.

Were you you were looking after prisoners at that time? Were you showing them trades or anything?

Carpenter.

You were showing them carpentry work?

We had a carpenter shop which I was in charge of overseer and I had my German foreman with me to translate to the other German prisoners what work had to be done and how to do it. And we had a shoe repair shop with another about 50 Germans in that and we had a tailors place where they made aprons and chef's cloth and everything for the army. I was there about three years.

Did you go there in 1939?

Oh no no! I joined up in the Veteran Guards of Canada in I think it was 1940 and we traveled all over the country doing guard duty on different ordinent stores and everything. And then til we got what they call a "breakin" guarding prisoners. I was at Sandhill Lake in Ontario and we had Italians, Japanese, you name them we had them the prisoners.

You were guarding them?

Oh yeh, the were behind barbed wire and we had to look after them.

When you say you joined up, that was voluntarily?

Oh yeh. Yeh I joined up in 1916. It was July, 1915. And July 1916 and the next month I was only 16 years of age when I first joined up in the first world war. And I was over in England there celebrating 14 days after my 16 birthday. Well, I didn't reach the trenches until 1917 and then they shipped me back over to England again because I was still too young. And I arrived back in Canada after the armistist in December 1918.

Could you tell us a little more about the life in the POW camps?

Yeh, we had some nice fellows in there. The prisoners were not warriors, they weren't fighters, they were men ...

They had never seen battle?

No. They were taken from merchant ships at sea.

So you mean they were at sea and if they were German they were taken prisoner?

Yes. Their ships were taken and they were transferred onto other boats and taken to Canada you see. Their boats that they were working on were used for merchant ships.

They were German merchant ships and they were taken prisoner?

And they were taken prisoner and brought out here and their boats were used for the Canadian or British government you see for transporting. But they were a nice bunch of fellows of course they naturally would be they were more or less like civilians. And aye, some of them used to work what's that word...

About how many prisoners were there like during the time you were there?

About 250. I used to get paid talk about strikes. They used to get \$.25 a day. They'd go in the morning we'd escort them into the buildings. Use to have guards escort them into the building and then they stayed in there and we looked after them while they were in there and they were making \$.25 a day like \$.12 $\frac{1}{2}$ in the morning and \$.12 $\frac{1}{2}$ in the afternoon.

So they got paid for working?

Oh yeh, they got paid for their working. And then the money they got, they could send for beer or chocolate bars or anything else downtown you see. That was brought up and sold to them through the cantine.

Sounds like they didn't suffer too much then?

No, they didn't suffer. Then again they talk about how I was crazy for doing that, but it was the orders of the camp. We use to take them Saturday afternoon and Sunday afternoon for a walk. Pretty near as far as Lennoxville. Pretty near to the bridge down there and then we would turn around and walk back up again. They said that they never did that in Germany so why should we do it over here. But the idea was that if we treated their prisoners good here they would treat our prisoners better.

Unfortunately they didn't.

Well that's it. Just like the Japanese in Hong Kong. You can't tell them the other side what to do.

Did they ever have any parties over there?

Parties, yes every Wednesday night. Of course, like I was going to say some of these men came off these big boats were first class cooks and some of them were first class musicians so Wednesday night we used to have the soldiers that belonged to the camp used to have girlfriends come up from Sherbrooke and they would have a dance. But like one woman said, "The prisoners were allowed to come down and mingle with the women

but that never happened. They always had to stay on a platform in a ... position. I had to refute that one time because one woman road in and said yes the German prisoners were even mingling around with the women. But that never was so because I was there all the time.

So they were separated?

They were separated. They had this big bandstand you see and they played their instruments on that and when it was all over they were escorted by soldiers back to their quarters.

So these parties that they had was just for the public?

Well, no no. It wasn't for the public. It was for the soldiers. And the girls were invited. I don't know how they invited the girls to come up. But anyways the girls would come up. I had friends that were in the army that their wives and daughters came up to visit and dance. Make an evening of it.

In our interviewing of other people, we heard that like the basic atmosphere of the camp was pretty loose that they had a good time. It was strict but not as

Well, like I said with the prisoners we couldn't treat them like soldiers that was going to cut your throat when you turned around because I was at the time in the carpenters shop and I had a blueprint from Ottawa and I had it on the floor see and kneeling over examining the blueprint and I happened to look up and who should sitting there watching me was the colonel of the camp. Now if them prisoners had wanted to do any damage they could have come over and hit me on the head

or cut my throat or killed me somehow cuz I was the only one in there.

Looking after these 52 prisoners?

Yeh. So you could see there was no toughness about it. They were very good just like you and I.

In our other interviewing we heard that there was one prisoner who was shot and killed for trying to escape or something.

I was wondering if you had heard anything about that?

No. Never, never. We had prisoners escape, but we've gotten them pretty near all back.

As far as you know, no one was ever killed for escaping?

No. Never heard of it.

What would happen to these people if they caught after the escape?

They would be transferred to another camp.

Like they weren't punished in any way?

Well, they'd maybe give them solitary and you know where the guards are in the guardroom. They'd put them like in a cell aye and keep them on. They'd give them their eats, but they'd keep them there and they wouldn't be able to mingle with the other prisoners. They'd stay there for let's say 21 days which was generally the longest they'd ever give anybody.

Is 21 days in solitary?

Yeh. No no there was never anyone shot, but I know like there was one fellow who went crazy and he cut his hand off. He was working in the butcher shop. A German prisoner. Of course, they

rushed him to Sherbrooke hospital and fixed him up. But that was the only one. But the order was when we first when that camp was first opened up at Newington ...

What year was that? Do you remember when it first opened up?

Oh, about 1940. They didn't have any washing facilities, no bathing, no taps, no water of any kind. They use to go down to the river down there under guard. Of course the guns, rifles were loaded. So even civilians who came down there and got to close and they were ordered away and they wouldn't go then they would shoot. They didn't know who they were. So they had orders to shoot civilians or prisoners.

Anybody trying to get into the way.

Yep. But nothing ever happened.

Do you know if there are any remains of that camp at all. Just where Sherbrooke has there maintenance shop.

Yeh, that's it.

Another thing that came up in some interviews with other people is that they had ski days. Do you know anything about this?

Skis?

Like they would go out and ski?

Oh yeh, they could go out. Like I said they had their parties out. Just like we used to take them for walks. I used to live up on Bowen Avenue right across from the camp and at night, I was an NCO, I could go home at night. Saturday afternoons we used to take turns used to have enough men we'd take turns my Saturday would be this Saturday. I'd be on duty tomorrow

next Saturday or Sunday I'd be off somebody else would be on. Well, then prisoners would go up there and they would paint a picture of my house.

This was all under guard though?

Oh, naturally, naturally.

About how many guards would it take to run that I wonder. Do you remember?

Oh, I would say it would be about 6 to 18 and then the NCOs and the captains about 24 men I guess.

Per ship like?

No no used to have a boxes you know. One in each box. They were off to you know. They weren't on duty all the time. You mentioned earlier that you got a blueprint from Ottawa when you were in the carpenter shop. What was that about?

Well, we used to have to make materials. We used to make.. the first thing we used to make was the tables. Have you seen the army tables?

No, I haven't.

Well, they are long. Say about 4 feet wide and 6 feet long. Then they have folding legs underneath. Then they have benches made and they are all made of wood. I used to have it fixed so the prongs go down and then there was a bar that would fit on and they put pins in to hold them aye. And then towards the latter part we were starting to make boxes. Collapsible boxes. They used to have the top, the bottom, the two sides, and the two ends and with long bolts so you could

fasten them up put a bolt through them put them ... And these were transporting motors across around to different parts where they needed them aye. Like the Ford, Crysler, Chevrolet. And each motor had a different blueprint because it had to be fastened down. We used to make blocks of wood, fasten them down, to hold them down solid. They could drop those boxes 20 to 30 feet from above ground and they wouldn't break.

They were that solid?

It was that solid yeh. Oh yeh, we used to do a lot of work in the carpenter work.

Were these motors used by the military or they go for the ...

No, the ordinance. Canadian Ordinance. You know what an ordinance is.

No I don't know.

You don't know. Well, that's like when they put automobiles together.... They had their own trucks and their own jeeps. You've seen them go around painted in all carky colors belonging to the army. Well that's what we called ordinance. Ordinance is also clothing department. They'll have boxes and boxes of different and then they would have cups and saucers and everything that the army needed to use that was ordinance.

You say a lot of these German prisoners helped you build these things?

Oh yes. I had 52 men working for me.

So you get quite a lot of work done in a week.

Well sure, you're darn right. We used to get CPR come down

and they'd shunt their box cars into the shop and then we had a bull gang about 12 men and they'd load the stuff up into the box cars. I got some pictures in here but I don't know just where they are. Some of my German prisoners shown working on the machines in the shop. Some of the pictures of the huts that they were sleeping in with all their flowers. They didn't have no other thing to do so they used to make flower beds all around the hut and all that stuff around their place. I'll tell you an interesting thing. One day the colonel we had two gates main gates going down into the compound. And the colonel was going in and he had one of these big red haired dogs. Irish Setter. That was his dog. He was going down to visit the prisoners in the compound. When he got into the inner gate all the German prisoner's dogs they all come to the gate you see and there were about 25 of them and they were barking and yelping and everything. So the colonel says, "No more of this, get rid of these dogs I don't care how you get rid of them, but get rid of them." I was in the sergeant mess, I was a sergeant at the time and I was in having dinner and this little German fellow he was working around serving us our meals and everything. He was told young fellow I got to rid of my dog. My bitch she just had ten pups. Little black spaniels. And he says I don't know what to do with them and I don't like to kill them. I says I'll take two give me two. And I says I'll

tell you what I'll do, I'll give you a pound of coffee for each of them. To make you happy, so I brought him down two pounds of coffee and I gave him the coffee and he gave me the two little pups. And all the others got destroyed. What happened to other dogs black ones I don't know, but I know I got my two. So it's just to show you that the colonel was mad at him and he told him he had to get rid of them.

So they had their own dogs there and everything?

Yeh. And then I don't know if you know about the building burning down. One of the buildings . Well we had a machine shop too and the corporal in charge of the machine shop and one of the prisoners wanted a piece of metal. It was right on the wall, it was kind of an angle affair- a bracket of some kind. This German working in the machine shop told the corporal I'd like to have that he says I need to have that to work in the machine shop. So the corporal says O.K. So of course they brought the ... and torch and everything went upstairs to the ... floor where all our storage of different kind of woodwork had been done finished and they were stacked up there. But underneath was where they had turpentine, kerosene, you mention it we had it. And he went up there and he was using the torch cutting this up of course the sparks come down and that is what started the fire.

Destroyed the whole building?

Destroyed the whole building. I was in there and another fellow

friend of mine. They had a little holes. Course we had to get rid of the prisoners aye. We had to get them back into the compounds. We started to try and put the fire out and they had little holes two-inch holes on the side of the wall. I runs over there and I said to my friend, "Bill go and turn the water on." So he went out and I was still standing there waiting for the water to come out. Oh he says never mind come on out he says the Sherbrooke Fire Department is here now. That was some fire. Burnt completely. Everything was gone. Of course it was all dry wood aye.

Nobody got hurt?

Oh no, nobody got hurt. There was nobody in there only just me and I got out in a hurry. When the Sherbrooke Fire Department was there. Oh boy this big black cloud was coming towards me I ducked down and I went out the door. That was in the fall that it happened and all winter long snow piled up on it and everything and then of course we had to get permission from the government to rebuild. So we got permission and in the spring time we start digging around in the snow to start salvage every nails and aluminum pins that they used to work with and everything like that. Then , of course, they cleaned the building out and then there were a lot of parts of the walls that were gone. So they put me in charge of the prisoners that was fixing up the wall. Come Saturday noon well they're suppose to quit at eleven o'clock aye and we just had one more batch of cement to make to fill in to finish it in so it would be a nice and

hard for Monday morning aye. They says no you ain't working. We finished at eleven o'clock what could I do? I couldn't command that they work. So I says I'll tell what I'll do. Each man that works on the job and fixes it up before he goes in I'll give them three bars of chocolate each. At that time you couldn't get any chocolate. So did they work. They worked and they got it all fixed up and all O.K. for Monday morning. I have them their bar of chocolates and away they went in and they were happy. When we come in the wall was nice and solid and they could put the door frames in you see. So it's quite a life in the army you see.

I guess so.

Yeh. I liked the army. Wish I wasn't too old today I'd get back in again. A great life. Course W.W. I I....

You were in the army during W.W. I?

Oh yeh. I went over as a private and I got over to England like I said and we tried camps we went to Brench... Camp stayed there two months and they sent 50 of our men to France from there what they call a draft. Then we moved from there and we went down to Seaford another place and that is where they had the big bucks. I'd ride behind it. The buck was ... open sea. We used to do our rifle practice down there. Then they took another 100 men from there and shipped them over to France. Of course, our men when they left us 117 battalion they went to the 14th the 24th 50th mark 87th the 60th they reinforced all those battalions in

France. So then when we were at Seaford they said well the rest of us go into shore by sea. So when we got to shore by sea we started us young fellows well there was about 25 of us young fellows they knew we were under age, we started digging in between the huts growing tomatoes or carrots or vegetables of any sort. Then they called us out one day and they asked us who would like to go to Crowbora to take the machine gun course. Course there were about 18 of us stepped out. So they give us a couple of sandwiches cuz we were on rations you see and you can't go from one place to another and depend on them to feed you because they only had enough for themselves. So they made some sandwiches for us, we got on the train and we got down to Crowbora we just got off of the train onto the platform and the sergeant came along. Don't want you he said I want men I don't want boys. So we just took the next train down and went back to camp. When we got back to camp a couple of days later says who wants go to learn signalling who wants to take the course in signalling. So there was about eight of us who stepped out. So we went over to another outfit signalling school stayed there til we finished our course. Then one day as I was they used to put us out in a different battalion headquarters you see for taking messages and sending messages and one day there was a message coming through signal who' was going to be sent to France going down the line there was my name. And two other of my pals their names were there. The three of us went to the

same battalion the 24th Victoria Rifles. I'm getting you fellows tried aye?

No this is interesting.

Well anyway we got to we went to Folton we took the ferry over to ... then we started to walk to find out where our battalion was. And we just caught up with our battalion at St. Deloy and then of course we did a march all day and all night til we got to our destination. We used to stop ten minutes on every hour.

For a break?

Yeh, for a break. Sit down and have a smoke for ten minutes and then he would say alright boys up we're going again and away we go. We marched all day and all night. That's the first time we every did it well, of course, when you first join in you get a lot of walking. They used to take you on route marches you know to keep you in good condition so when we got over to France we didn't think nothing of it. So anyway the first night we were in the trenches a shell came over and broke our telephone wires, and of course like darn nuts we went to climb up on the paradome and we had to go along feeling for the wires you see because we couldn't light no lights aye. So we go along feeling the wires to see where the break was and the other guy go further along and he say I got it and he come back and we connected it and everything be alright. Next morning when we looked were, we were only about 150 feet from the Germans. So we didn't do that anymore.

I guess not. Crawling around right there.

Couldn't tell we were in trenches.

Do you aye - what about rationing during this time?

We use to have one loaf of bread. Of course, I told in the Sunshine that we got a loaf of bread. Well anybody would think that it was a big loaf of bread, but it's only a small bread it's only about that round.

About three inches or so?

Used to cut it in four. Four men on a loaf of bread. Now that was our ration. And then they use to give us hard tacks. Hard biscuits and give us corny beef corn beef.

This was during the second world war?

During the first world war.

How about the second world war?

Well, I don't know anything about that. I wouldn't know, I stayed in Canada.

Yeh, but the rationing here?

Oh, rations in Canada. They were O.K. Like I said we were in the sergeants mess and our rations weren't any too bad. Of course, we paid a little extra. We could always pay a couple of dollars more and we had mess sergeants who would go down the city and buy extra things for us.