

Forest History Foundation, Inc.
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

W. E. Dexter
Libby, Montana and Minneapolis, Minnesota
August, 1953 and October, 1953

by John Larson

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I was born in Weymouth, Nova Scotia, in 1869. My full name is Walter Ernest Dexter. I go by the name of Ernest, but I'm never called Ernest; I'm "W.E".

My father was in the lumber business to a small extent on the Sissibou River. They had decided to built what was called the Western Counties Railway. This railroad was from Digby to Yarmouth, down the coast to St. Mary's Bay and the Bay of Fundy. St. Mary's Bay was an inlet of the Bay of Fundy. When they started building the railroad bridge, my father got the contract for making the "trunnels" or wooden pins. These pins were made of wood and when they had mortised and tenoned the timbers to go onto the posts for the underpart of the bridge, there were holes bored and these pins were to drive into the timbers to hold them together.

Father had started with a little mill called a "live mill", a gang that sawed round logs. The logs had to be fastened in the jacks and then sawed half through, then stopped and fastened in the jacks behind to take out when the gang was through sawing the load. The gang was powered with an overshot water well. The water flowed onto the paddle wheel which had a fitman from the wheel to the gang. This would run the gang up and down. There must have been about seven or eight saws. They just had small spruce logs. The timber was all spruce. Their first shipment of lumber was to go to the West Indies, and father was the one that went with it. Sailing, it takes quite a bit of time to go to the West Indies and back again to Nova Scotia. When he got back, the mill had burned. His partner had collected the insurance and left for parts unknown.

Well, of course, that was when I was very small. All I know is that I used to get ahold of the books and go through where father had kept his bookkeeping and mother used to explain to me what it meant. I even forget the man's name, but I know they called him an Irishman. The books were entirely burned. And when father came back, he was a broken man. But, he did manage to eek along some way until he got a job in Meteghan River, Nova Scotia, with a firm named Blackadar Brothers, thirty miles or so from Weymouth. And shortly after that they had to have a landlady, or boardmistress, so mother had the family moved to Meteghan River and kept a boarding house and the older sisters helped her out.

In playing with the boys there, I got so I could talk French. In the winter months, let's see, I think it was five months that we went to school in the winter. The teacher, as I remember, was a girl in her early twenties or somewhere along there, and the only thing she taught was to read and write French, and some arithmetic, and not much, but a little geography and a little English history, but it was in French. So there I had to learn the French first before I could get anywhere. I must have gone there four winters.

Our company had another mill at Hectanooga, that was toward Yarmouth. They were working at this other mill and getting it ready while father was at Meteghan River, and this was a second mill - Blackadar and Company was the name; and they were English. The logs were put into the water and the stream wasn't very large, so they had to dam it to back the water up, and then they would flash-drive -- they'd open it up and let the water go down and the logs would go with it. And then down below so far they'd have another splash dam and so on, until they got down where they'd go into the lake where the mill was built. Well, when they got to the lake, the water was running out of the lake. They'd never looked into it to see whether that creek that they put the logs in was going to flow into the lake where the mill was. Well, they took it up with father, and father went down and built seven locks -- that's before the Soo locks were built. I was pretty proud of my dad because he knew what the locks meant and what he could do with them. And he made seven locks in this stream that flowed out of Hectanooga Lake into this other stream, and floated all the logs back up into the lake. Then they boomed them across the lake for the winter.

Later on father and the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was going on fifteen then. When we landed in Minneapolis, the population was 120,000. I remember that distinctly, and it's a half a million today, or better, I guess. We came by steamboat from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, to Boston and from Boston to Minneapolis. Father was born in Brewer, Maine, and mother was born in Calais, Maine. Father retained his citizenship by coming to the States and voting election years.

He worked first for a firm by the name of Bray and Robinson, and they were on Eighth Avenue Northeast and the river. A year or two later (I am not positive which) he changed and went to work for Hall and Ducey. Hall and Ducey was the start of the Shevlin mill. Hall's daughter was married to Tom Shevlin, and Tom Shevlin was taken into partnership with Hall a little later, and it was called Hall and Shevlin, to start with. Well, it continued Hall and Shevlin for some time and later on it was Shevlin-Clark. And then it was Shevlin, Clark, Carpenter and Company.

I had an uncle who was here before father, and he was working for the McMullen mill on St. Anthony falls. By the way, my father and

two brothers were married to my mother and two sisters, and they all lived in Nova Scotia at one time and later on lived in Minneapolis.

Father went to work right away. One thing that started him was that his brother was here, and he told him that he thought he could get a job running a lath mill easily. It was quite a job to get a job running a lath mill. My uncle made - as a boy I thought it was a great thing - twenty-five dollars a day during the summer months that the mill ran. Twenty-five dollars a day. He had the lath mill by the thousand, and he sawed laths per thousand of laths, and he got so much a thousand, and it made his work - two shifts per day, of course, it made his work equal to an average of twenty-five dollars a day. Well, father never was lucky enough to get that much. The first sawing that father did, he sawed on one of the first band sawmills that was set up in Minneapolis. The saws wouldn't stay on the pulley, and they had the habit of going through the ceiling. He stood it for a while, but he had to give it up. It was too much of a strain on him. Whether they were the first mill in Minneapolis to have a band saw or not, I don't know, but that was Bray and Robinson.

When we came here there was five sawmills on the falls there in Minneapolis on the west side of the Mississippi and then there were five on the east side of the river. The east side was called St. Anthony by all of the older persons living in Minneapolis at that time. We got there in 1885, and I went to work with father in '86 in the Shevlin mill. I pulled laths in the lath mill the first season that I worked in the mill, and I know that the lath machine was quite high and father made me a sort of a stand to stand on so that I would be up high enough to pull the lath off the table.

We lived, well, I would say that it was pretty nearly two miles from the mill on the east side in St. Anthony. And, of course, I walked both ways. Father used the streetcar. I didn't make enough to spend money for carfare in those days. It was customary to get up shortly after five o'clock for me. That made quite a day for mother. The mill was ^{two}ten miles from the house. Well, after a while I got handy enough so that I could put up my own lunch to help her. I helped her more than the girls did. My lunch would be two sandwiches, a piece of pie, a cookie or a doughnut, and let's see, I drank water. We didn't drink either tea or coffee then, the young folks. I drank water at the mill. We ate lunch at twelve o'clock - twelve to one. You'd just pick out a place, and then maybe you'd have one that you'd rather visit with than the other fellow and you'd get in a corner there by yourself, and eat your lunch.

After a while I learned to shove lath, but I never worked on a bolter that was really too heavy. That was handling the slabs and there was the big edge four feet long to make the cant set-ups to make the laths. The lath saw was three saws, and the lath cant or lath bolt - some called it cant, some bolt - that would make three laths. It was good for three,

or it would make one or two or three. If the slab was a little wider and had another one in, that one was run back and put through again.

After we'd been there, oh, two or three years, we found a place near the mill where there was an old Irish lady that had a boarding house, and we used to go up there and give her three dollars and a half for twenty-one meals. That would be the noon meal, the big meal. It was meat and potato and there was always two vegetables, all the bread and butter you wanted, and always a piece of pie or pudding, and well, there was a great deal of plain cake with vinegar sauce. There was more of that than pie; it all tasted good, though. There was no attention paid to salads or things like that. Generally you helped yourself to meat and potatoes a second time though, if you were hungry.

The mills operated only during the summer months in Minneapolis and when they shut down, generally around the first of November, we had to hop out and find something else to do. Well, there was generally a job in a box factory or a planing mill or a sash and door shop or the molding room of the sash and door shop or the rip-saw or the cut-off saw. Also, if it was real bad, real hard like during the Cleveland panic - in '92-'96 - I would hop out on the ice fields and get about six or eight weeks cutting ice. But the boys nowadays don't realize what we used to get for wages, but we had to be on the ice field as soon as we could see and we couldn't leave as long as we could see, and we got a dollar and ten cents a day. I put in three or four different winters doing that.

Now this is slipping in politics a little bit, but it won't hurt anything -- had a pretty good friend who was an alderman of the Second Ward of Minneapolis. I don't know whether they do it nowadays or not, but he was pretty handy at getting a friend on the jury once in a while, and for four or five winters, I put in six weeks each winter on the jury. Besides this I was in charge of the subscriptions and the delivery of the Pioneer Press. And that was Mr. O'Brian's job, but when he got - by the way, he was a second cousin of my mother's - when he got so he thought he could depend on me, he gave me the job of hauling the paper, of going to St. Paul and getting the paper in the morning. I went over by horse and buggy. It was, well, it was like an automobile pick-up today, only it wasn't quite so big as that. Perhaps a subscription would be around a thousand to fifteen hundred papers, as I remember. I think later it grew larger. That was for all of Minneapolis, but they also had the Minneapolis Tribune and the Minneapolis Journal at that time. And this was the Pioneer Press getting in. A great many, especially among the older people, as I look back and rehash it, it was older people that wanted the Pioneer Press. It was politics, I think; I don't know. It was a morning paper, so I used to go down at night after my day's work. I'd work ten hours in the mill and then I'd go home and eat and go and get the horse and rig and go to St. Paul and up into the building, I forget what floor it was. I'd go to bed right away, and they'd wake me up at twenty minutes to three; I'd go down, and

the papers were being run off, and after they got enough for the Minneapolis supply, why they gave them to me and I started home. That went fine until in the winter time. But really, in the latter part of the '80s, if you get the records you'll find that there were more days 40 below zero than anything else, to start with in the morning.

I took care of the papers, and the carriers were at the Pioneer Press office. That was on Washington Avenue, between Nicollet and Hennepin. Later on it was in the Tribune Building. By the way, it was in the Tribune Building when it burned. I don't know whether you know it or not, but there were seven men coming down the ladder from the editorial rooms of the Tribune, and the last man burned his hands and let go and he cleaned the ladder. Well, I remember that Milton Picket and another man by the name of Williams, whom I was acquainted with, were killed at that time. I kept on with this the year around for a few years - I guess maybe four - and then the folks, of course, objected to my being away from home. And another thing, at the stock yards at that time there were a man or two knocked in the head - robbery, you know - and that kept me home. Mr. O'Brian used to handle that himself after that.

When Grover Cleveland was president, pretty hard times - the worst panic we ever had was then. Well, I saw a roulette wheel on the corner of the street where you stepped onto the bridge from the east side going to the west side. I seen a roulette wheel there. That was Central Avenue; I believe it's East Hennepin now. I was scared to death of it. I'd go across the street to get away from the gang that was hanging around it. We'd see that when we was coming home from work. See, the mill was on Fourth Avenue North and the river bank on the west side. By the way, the Great Northern Depot is on the upper side when you come across the bridge from the east side now. Well, there wasn't any depot then; there was a driveway underneath there, and the express wagons went down under there to pick up the deliveries and pick up the freight.

The men that were in the woods for the winter work would also take in the drive. Well, when they got to Brainerd they generally let go there. Some of them came further, but the logs were sorted there to a certain extent. Anyway, after the drive they would come to Minneapolis and on Washington Avenue between Nicollet and Hennepin was the hang-out for these men. They were called "Mainites" and that was called "Skootick" Corner. That was a word for lumberjack - "Skootick" - and the boys would congregate there and visit. Well, they were lumberjacks, but they never made any great amount of disturbance, only a heavy drinking man would get into trouble. As soon as their money was spent they'd begin to hire out to the logging contractors again to go back and hay. They used to hay the meadows wherever there was hay that they could get for their camps. Build camps, build roads and get ready for logging again.

The boss could go in there and every man that knew him, that had worked for him before as a rule, would come to him for a job. And they were tickled to death to work for the same company again, regardless. Now if they got - common labor got twelve dollars a month and board - that was pretty fair pay. If a man was sawing, he would generally get about \$18 or \$20 at times, and at times more than that, and the log hauler was the big fellow, the teamster. And he would drive either two or four or six horses, whatever there were. But on the ice roads, downhill toward the lake, they had two horses, as a rule. Now there were Belgians or Clydesdale - they're the big horses, you know - and they were kept at the sawmill plant, as a rule, of some of the lumber men that had mills, and made deliveries in the summer, but they'd inevitably go back to the woods again if they lived that long. But they were worked so hard in the woods that they didn't always live that long. So that compares with the skid row of Washington Avenue as it is around the Milwaukee Depot. Oh, there was a lot of honor with them about working for the same outfit again. I remember a little story that happened. I heard a talk between two of them. One of them had met the other lad there on the corner - I happened to be there at the time - and he asked him,

"Where you work last winter?"

"You don't know?" He was French.

"No, I don't know."

"Well, I worked for Link Ted. You know Link Ted?"

"Yes. Well, what team did you drive?"

"You don't know that team?"

"No."

"You know that big black one?"

"Yes."

"With a bald face?"

"Yes."

"The other one she had no face at all?"

"Yah, I remember the team."

I worked principally in the shingle mill first, and later on, in the lath mill, when father got the lath mill to run with the shingle mill. Still later, I got the job of operating the lath mill while my father had the shingle mill. There was seventeen men with the lath mill and the

shingle mill together. In the lath mill there was two picking stock; one handing on the table; one bolting - that's shoving through the machine; one taking away; and one man tying the laths.

The men were paid once a month; and father paid his own men with cash, and the mill men were paid with checks. By the way, I'll give you a little incident. During the second panic, about 1907, Bovey & DeLaittre were on the west side and they had a large mill - larger than the Shevlin mill. During this panic they paid their men \$1.65 a day with time checks. And the men had to pay ten percent to the one that cashed it in order to get their money. And Shevlin, to show that he wouldn't do that, paid \$2.00 a day and gave two men a wheelbarrow and wheeled the money around and paid them, for a year. That was all he could do it for - a year - because it was so much work that they couldn't do it, but they always paid, well, they did pay \$1.75 once, but they always paid off and paid the men their money in full. No waiting for their pay. Well, on the east side there was Farnum and Lovejoy; there was McMullen Brothers; and then there were two other mills, but I don't remember the names of them.

I worked in the Shevlin mill with my father. Now understand, I was working directly for my father, but he had the shingle mill contract, and I worked in that mill for twenty years. Then they needed a man in the lath mill and they took me away from father and I run the lath mill for two years.

Well, then there was a superintendent there by the name of Dea Howard. He was transferred to the Bemidji mill at Bemidji, Minnesota, which was a Shevlin mill, and I was to take his place in the Minneapolis mill, the Shevlin sawmill, and I got away from other things then because I had all I could handle as a young fellow, without any experience at all in operating a sawmill. Worked in the lath and shingle mill for years, but never worked in a sawmill a whole day, sawmill proper, up to that time. I was put in as superintendent at the sawmill in Minneapolis in 1904. I remember an instance where there was a man in one of the mills. There was quite a number of mills in Minneapolis then. There was about sixteen of them that was as large or larger than the Shevlin mill, and there was a superintendent there by the name of Flannigan, and he couldn't understand how Shevlin come to pick a boy out of a kindergarten to put in to run their mill. But it suited me, for certain. The Shevlin mill was a fifty-two saw gang and two bands. There were a little better than forty men with the sorting chain. The filer's the big man, that is, the big paid man. And there are his helpers, and the sawyer, the setter, the carriage rider, and then on down to the edger. There was the edgerman and his helper - sometimes they didn't have one, then there was the edging catcher behind; and that went to the trimmer, next there was the man on the head end and the man on the tail end; and the man pulling saws up overhead trimming the lumber; and then the lumber straightener;

and the lumber grader behind the trimmer; and then the sorting table beyond that.

The first year as foreman I got \$75.00 a month. But after that year I went and talked to Mr. Clark.

"Well, what did you expect?"

"Well, I thought I ought to get at least \$100 a month."

"Well," he says, "I'll tell the cashier to give you the difference."

So I got a hundred dollars a month after that. That was pretty good pay. Well, I was there one season, that was in 1904. They had a mill at St. Hilaire, Minnesota - the Crookston Lumber Company. They started up in April, but the winter repairs hadn't been taken care of as they were supposed to have been, so the mill only ran a day or two and they had trouble. They shut down and I was transferred from the Minneapolis mill to the St. Hilaire mill. And that superintendent was discharged; so having had pretty good luck with the other mill, they sent me to be up there and put a man in my place. It had been about the same size mill, but at that time it was only a one band mill and a resaw. I imagine there would be about twenty men around there. I never did know exactly. I only worked there from May to October.

Mr. Neils' superintendent at Cass Lake had been unfortunate. He had got into a little argument with the wood-hauler and the wood-hauler had hit him over the head with an iron pipe and put him out of commission and Mr. Clark and Mr. Shevlin came to Crookston, wired me to meet them there and put the proposition to me to come to Cass Lake and run that mill. They also had a mill at Crookston, but it was not operating at that time, so I was to go to Cass Lake. That was in October, 1906, and I started working for the Neils people at that time.

Mr. Neils raised me, I think, \$25 a month right at the start, and by the way, I got an increase for the men in the mill from Mr. Neils for 25¢. They paid \$2.25 after that and they had only paid \$2.00 before. I got the men solid with me and that was the big thing those days. They'd stay by you through thick and through thin. Harvest fields created quite a disturbance though. The men left to go. Later on they raised the pay just a little bit around harvest time to keep the men. Oh, we had to. We raised it two bits. That's for ten hours.

We had a band and a resaw at Cass Lake. The resaw was a band saw, that was two. That's a horizontal resaw. I was superintendent there, too.

Anyway, I went from Cass Lake - I was living there then - that was in 1907, and I went down to Minneapolis for Christmas and I found

father sick in bed. I didn't know he was that bad. He died with Bright's disease - he died while I was there. I was sitting on the bed talking with him. And oh, after the funeral and it come time to go back to Cass Lake, I went over to the office. Mr. Shevlin had asked that I come over. Father was working for Mr. Shevlin when he died. (By the way, for years he was check scaler in the woods. If they had fifteen or twenty camps in the woods under contractors, father was the check scaler that would scale the homes to see that they were scaling right. He'd check each one every so often.) And Mr. Clark happened to be in the front office when I went in and he knew me, and he took me into his office and he said,

"Ernest, I want to tell you something. Your father is dead, buried. Well, if when I come to leave this world I have no other friends but the friendship of such men as your father, I'm satisfied."

There were no changes in the Cass Lake mill while I was there anymore than that we had worked some of the machinery and parts over. Wherever I went there was something the matter. Now the engine at Cass Lake was going to be discarded and I took the machinist and knocked the nodle pin out of the disk, rebored it and put one in by hand, and that engine was running when the mill shut down, and it ran all the years between the time of my leaving there and coming here until they shut the mill down.

All the time I was there I had the one saw filer, and he came out here afterwards. I was out of a filer and got him to come. The band sawmill was quite new and there weren't many real experienced saw filers. Some of the mills were putting in the double-cut mills then. Mr. Shevlin did in one or two mills and later, very soon after starting them, he took them out again, and went back to the single cut band.

I was at Cass Lake almost nine years, until January, 1914, and then was transferred to Libby, oh, to sort of pay attention to the building of the mill here with Mr. Horstkotte. And in the meantime, Mr. Neils, who as I told you before, was Mr. Shevlin's partner, was put in charge of the Libby transaction, I'll call it, or job, and Mr. Paul Neils, the older son, was there operating when I got there. This man Botschik was superintendent there, but he was a lad that let the other fellow get the best of him sometimes, and the filer and the sawyer got into a mix-up that the saws weren't right or something. He couldn't settle the situation so it made it bad. So I was sent there to straighten things out, tear down the old mill and build a new one.

We started building the mill, tearing down the old mill, let me see, the last of January, 1914, and we started on the new one right away. I remember though one incident. It was my opinion that we ought to put the mill and the sheds on cement blocks, but Mr. Neils was positive it wouldn't run over fifteen years at Libby, and he didn't want to spend that money.

The mill was built on pilings. But we're still running and we have the cement blocks all in. We had practically the same equipment as we had at Cass Lake - that would be with a twelve-inch band saw blade on the sawmill. We changed the space or the distance from tooth to tooth from, oh, an inch and three-quarter, and changed again. We used Atkins and Simon's saws principally.

When Mr. Neils was ready for me to go to Libby, I was sent to Rainy River, Ontario, to a Shevlin mill, the Shevlin-Matthew Lumber Company, to look over the machinery and see if I thought it would be all right to put into the Libby mill. It was a little larger mill. The engine was too large, but a great deal of the other machinery was shipped, carload after carload, to Libby and put into the Libby mill. So it wasn't all built of new material or new machinery. The shafting and the shaft couplings and the bearings and all had to be worked over, and there was some replacements, of course.

The drive, the main belt, at the Libby mill today, drove the Shevlin-Matthew mill at Rainy River while it operated, and that leather belt originally came out of the Pillsbury Flour "A" mill in Minneapolis. It was made by W. S. Knott and Company. The salesman told me, after we had decided to take that belt and it was being fixed up for Libby, that it was first made for the Pillsbury mill. And it was taken out of there; narrowed down and was sold to Shevlin for the Shevlin-Matthew mill in Rainy River, Ontario. Matthew was the Canadian man; Shevlin was the American-side man. And then it was moved with the other machinery and was brought to Libby, and it's still operating. I saw it only just a few days ago. And he said that the belt had been made in 1879, I think. He knew of it as a belt in 1879. That was the record of it being made for the Pillsbury mill, I believe. But I may be wrong on that. You know, you think of a thing a number of times and tell it a number of times, you get so you think that's the Gospel truth. But I always prided myself on that story, right from the start, and I always told it exactly the same. It's been repaired quite a number of times, but the bulk of the belt is still running, in the Libby mill.

A wonderful change has been made in the mill here in the last two years. Well, there has been considerable of a change in adding more machinery to cut more lumber in the last couple of years. And it really is so hard to get around in there now that I have to go up onto the top floor where the visitors go, in order to get around the mill. But they have run since May 29th, when they started up, in 1914, and are running today, and Mr. George Neils, the logging manager, tells me that they've got fifty years of sawing in sight. Operating under the sustained yield. My grandson could tell you all about that because he was sent to Seattle by the Neils, with a committee of the union and a committee of the company, and they stayed there for several days. He studied sustained yield. They're the only ones, I think, that have gone into it to the extent that they have, and they've gone into it heavy. And are making money, too.