

Elmer Carncross

13720 - 56 Avenue, Surrey, B.C.

Interviewed - January 19, 1973.

Founder: Western Peat Company, Richmond
now called - Western Peat Moss

born: July 8, 1892 in Kensington district, south of Cloverdale.

. . . father farmed there and worked as logger Royal City Mills, logging company on Coast Meridian Road, south of Kensington Prairie.

. . . attended public school, Cloverdale . . . 1909 to Royal City High School, New Westminster, graduated 1911. No high schools then in Surrey.

. . . 1912 east to Ontario Agricultural College . . . graduated spring 1916 . . . joined Canadian Army joining 66 Battery, Canadian Field Artillery . . . after 1918 Armistice got leave for post graduate studies at University of Edinburgh . . . returned to Canada August 1918.

. . . joined Soldier Settlement Board, then operating farm school at Matsqui, replacing former principal . . . school closed 1921 . . . became field supervisor Soldier Settlement Board.

. . . noted increasing import of peat moss for poultry litter. . . type of moss very absorbent . . . made exceedingly good litter . . . "peat moss" grew in bogs . . . worked on bogs in district Surrey - Langley - Richmond where heavy covering of moss . . . no information available on how to remove moss from bogs to put into commercial form.

. . . work done for heating, burning of peat east . . . knew of European man behind some of operations . . . he had been imported to specialize in this work.

. . . wrote government to see if he would come and look over peat moss on Pacific . . . not much use for production of peat moss as a litter.

. . . World Conference on Soils, Washington, D.C. . . . attending was Dr. Oswald, Chief of Experimental Production of peat moss in Sweden . . . had come across continent looking for peat moss but didn't see

bogs . . . persuaded Dr. Oswald visiting Vancouver to bring equipment drills to little bog at Whalley . . . top layer was five feet peat moss . . . describes excitement of the Swede from starting at 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. drilling the bog . . . he brought the profile of the bog to Carncross a classic.

Result: top five feet of bog profiled was excellent peat moss . . . enough to start a small plant.

Carncross organized small plant . . . found Swedish immigrants who worked peat in Old Country . . . one had managed a peat moss bog there, was hired . . . this man killed shortly in accident.

. . . at beginning local suppliers for poultry industry backward in accepting the moss though much better than European - shipped moss.

First crop small: 5,000 bales . . . Washington Co-op Association at Lyden (U.S.A.) was interested in getting some of moss . . . took total production for season, 5,000 bales . . . otherwise trouble selling locally.

Next Season: took annual capacity from bog - 30,000 bales . . . same time drilled bogs on Lulu Island (1930) found some had first class peat. Result: opened 160 acre bog immediately . . . then built plant, moved to full production on bog . . . on Westminster Highway north end of #9 Road . . . expanded peat marketing territory into Oregon, California, some mid-western States . . . as market grew other companies went on Lulu Island bogs and industry grew to considerable size . . . demands for peat grew for poultry litter and gardening uses . . . market helped by war in Europe and none available from Germany or Sweden sources. Problems in production: yearly fires on bogs from carelessness or sparks of tractors and occasional company plant were burned to ground.

Troubles getting peat dry some years, depended on sun drying . . . wet summers curtailed production volume.

Total area commercial peat moss (Richmond) was well distributed on flat lands around where agricultural productions on, particularly bordering North Arm . . . several thousand acres in this area yielded first class moss . . . more limited areas occurred along South Arm.

. . . invented conveyor to lift peat moss off ground and first one went out 1,000 feet (see picture) . . . later conveyors used to bring moss to storage , . . Conveyor of two cables, chicken netting on cables, travelled on rollers with wooden horse on top and bottom driven by a drum . . . elevated into storage . . . dried peat came off ground at end of summer, had benefit of July and August sun.

. . . when peat stored in buildings - conversion into bales or loose peat made in plant.

. . . marketed peat down Pacific coast by rail . . . later trucks brought materials from U.S. to Vancouver picked by peat loads on return.

. . . as peat moss production grew less from Lulu Island bogs, other plants replaced, as in Delta.

. . . his company had two plants at peak time on Lulu Island, other plant 3/4 mile further along Westminster Highway . . . bulky nature of peat made easier handling if plant built nearby.

. . . 1960's was greatest volume of production from Lulu Island bogs . . . towards end of this period some of plants were completely out of supply.

. . . 2,000 years for peat to grow . . . peat has very high acidity and peat moss generally has a fibre not broken down but preserved by acid qualities . . . preservative.

. . . present production of peat greatly changed from digging by hand largely because of very stiff increase for labor . . . now use mostly scratching process on top of bog, makes peat fine enough to handle . . . sun dries an inch or two from surface . . . vacuum pickup

machine goes over surface of bog, ready for processing . . . if too damp to process flash driers were developed . . . peat passes through driers in seconds at 1500 degrees , . . peat goes through this intense heat in a second or two.

. . . as some of bogs exhausted on Lulu Island . . . found bog surface left in excellent condition to grow cranberries.

. . . Western Peat exhausted bog - now planted to cranberries (over 300 acres) . . . production of this fruit tremendously developed.

Carncross continued off tape

In 1971 Western Peat Moss took off 2,400 tons of cranberries . . . Experimental Station at East Wharem, Mass. U.S.A. said cranberries couldn't be grown here . . . Carncross recalled they grew wild in the bog . . . in Massachusetts it cost \$15,000 to \$25,000 an acre to prepare for planting . . . on Lulu Island they took peat moss off . . . cranberries were planted and grew . . . plant got eastern experts in to solve problems of growing . . . Western Peat Moss also had plants in Eastern Canada.

Problem of Cranberries: flower sets in spring but chilly mornings of May creates ground frost which kills cranberries . . .

Solution: Put 300 acres cranberries under sprinklers . . . electric rig rings bell if temperature goes below setting . . . sprinklers must be turned on . . . recalled whole bog glistening (water) in morning.

. . . cranberries picked by one person machines operated by Hindu women . . . cranberries pulled up on spokes into a sack or box . . . 700 pound boxes roped and on to truck . . . modern method roped boxes air lifted by hired helicopter 1/2 mile to 3/4 onto bog then hooked to remove to dry edge of bog or roadway . . . Western Peat Moss is only company here using helicopter . . . takes 3 miles to airlift boxes 3/4 mile to roadway.

At Northern Peat - Cranberry growing area is flooded . . . cranberries float to corner and are picked up.

Carncross sold out his plant 1964 plus other plants one in Manitoba, two in New Brunswick, and big plant in Delta still operating . . . all sold to Texas, Minnesota (Redwing) owners.

Cranberry farming at Western Peat started 1942 and by 1946 a successful commercial crop was taken off.

Dellis Cleland