

INTERVIEW WITH RALPH McDONALD.....February 23, 1973

Richmond Archives Interview #27, Tape #3, Side 2.

*[Interviewer may be Dellis Cleland, so will refer to her as "DC" and Ralph McDonald as "Ralph".
Interviewed Ralph McDonald at his home on 64th Avenue in Surrey, formerly of Sea Island.]*

DC – Mr. McDonald, when were you born and where?

Ralph – I was born on Sea Island, August 1899. I was there up to 2 years ago.

DC – Can I go back, and ask you about where your family came from.

Ralph – My Dad was born in Glengarry, Ontario and he left there as a young man of about 18, he and his brother Hugh McDonald.

DC – What was his first name?

Ralph – Duncan. They logged in Wisconsin, then they came to San Francisco and then by boat to Vancouver. This was in 1874. In 1875 they got interested in Sea Island and bought 500 acres.

DC – How did they hear about Sea Island?

Ralph – I don't really know that, but I think they paid \$8.00 an acre in those days. My Dad and his brother Hugh had to work out, to make money for buildings. They worked around the Marpole area, and then they borrowed money at 10% interest. In later years, they split the farm up the center, so they each had almost 250 acres.

DC – Where was this farm situated, that your father and his brother had? Was it facing the North Arm of the river?

Ralph – It went along McDonald Road to Miller Road.

DC – What kind of farming was your father doing?

Ralph – Milk cows and general farming. At one time 70 or 80 cows. He employed 3 men, until us boys grew up and could take their place.

DC – When he bought the acreage in 1875 was he married?

Ralph – No, he didn't get married until 1886. My mother's name was Isabella McDowell from Shawville, Quebec. She was born there. Actually I had an uncle, Alex Kilgour, who moved to

Sea Island much earlier than my Dad did. He had the first Reeve of Richmond as a partner, named Hugh Boyd.

DC – Do you remember your father talking about Kilgour?

Ralph – Yes, I remember my Uncle, he died when I was 7 years old. He had retired from the farm and had a home on 12th Avenue. That was the first funeral I ever went to.

DC - Can you tell me about your early childhood?

Ralph – I went to school, at the Sea Island School on my Dad's property about a mile from where we lived. I went there until I was 12 or 13. The Laings and the others on Sea Island had to go to Bridgeport for higher education. We went by horse and buggy and they had a bit of a building where we could keep our horses. We went across the old Lulu Island Bridge by Grauer's store. I remember when I was about 16, it was a very cold winter and the ice piled up between the two bridges and they had to break it up with a tugboat and dynamite. The ice was all broken and about 12 feet high, between the Marpole Bridge and the Lulu Island Bridge. I had to quit school before I finished high school because of the war. I was the only one left on the farm. By the way, I was the youngest of six and I had three brothers that went to the Peace River country. The reason I had to quit, was my other brother Duncan went into the Army and that left just me on the farm. I couldn't quite complete high school.

DC – Did you farm with your father?

Ralph – Yes, my Dad was gored quite badly by a bull but he lived a couple of months. When my brother Dunc came home from the Army he and I farmed for some years with the milk cows and general farming. In 1954 I sold 5 1/2 acres to the Richmond School Board and it was named after my Dad, Duncan McDonald. Also, McDonald Road. It used to be called # 12 Road.

DC – Did you go on farming?

Ralph – I farmed until 1958 and then I retired and rented it. In 1970 the Dept. of Transport bought the last piece of my land and the next year I moved to Surrey.

When I first went to school, it was two rooms and my teacher was Miss McKenzie. Before I went to school a Mr. Barton boarded at our house and I think he was the first teacher. He would later be known as Clugston and Barton. Barton married a McCleery. Before I left Sea Island School, half the students were Japanese.

DC – Did their families work in the canneries on Sea Island?

Ralph – Yes, their families lived at what they called Acme Cannery. Their fathers were fishermen mostly.

DC – Was this on the Middle Arm?

Ralph – It was on what they called Shannon Road in those days. On the Middle Arm.

DC – Did you ever work in the cannery in the summertime?

Ralph – I think when I was 10 years old, I worked 2 days at the Celtic Cannery that was down at the foot of Blenheim. I got \$2.00 and I thought that was pretty good.

DC – Of course, you and your brothers were always busy working on the farm.

Ralph – I mostly farmed.

DC – When you were 10 or 12 years, what were your chores on the farm?

Ralph – Helping with the milking, the haying. In those days the farms were 100 acres or more and when it came time to threshing the neighbours came together to help one another. Also, when we did silo, winter feed for the cattle, the neighbours helped one another. It was hard work, but when we look back, we enjoyed those days.

DC – Do you remember the harvesting days? There would have been a lot of cooking.

Ralph – There would be about 10-14 men and they had to be fed. The women seemed to vie with one another and put up pretty good meals.

DC – Would you leave school to help with the threshing?

Ralph – No I wouldn't say that. My Dad seemed to be well enough to hire men when I was young.

DC – Your days must have been quite long for you, when you were 10-14 years of age, doing all these farm chores and going to school. What time did you get up in the morning?

Ralph – I'd say 5:00-5:30. The milking was done before breakfast. My brother Dunc and I, after my Dad died, my Dad had sold his cows and we decided to go back into milking and we didn't have too much money and we bought calves and raised them until they were old enough to milk. I remember well, that when you have 50 cows to milk you really have a chore on your hands. We'd go out at 5 am and lots of mornings not in until 11:00 for breakfast. And for that reason we bought I think, the first milking machine on Sea Island. It was a McCartney Milking Machine. It was a great help.

DC – You wouldn't have to worry about pasteurizing?

Ralph – No, there was no such thing as pasteurizing that I know of, it was all sold as whole milk.

DC – How did you sell the milk?

Ralph – Once a day the milk was taken by 10 gallon cans in Marpole and left on a stand for the freight to pick up.

DC – Did all the people on Sea Island take their milk to Marpole?

Ralph – The ones who sold to Richmond Dairy, which was the biggest dairy in Vancouver at the time, they brought their milk to Marpole in 10 gallon cans. BC Electric took it to Vancouver. In later years, certain dairies sent a truck to pick up milk at little stands on your farm.

DC – Did you experience having water come back in those cans from Marpole? Or did you have no problem getting water on the farm, in the early days?

Ralph – In the early days, we saved rain water. I remember when the second bridge between Eburne and Marpole, my Dad got some of the lumber and made a large tank and the water was saved as it came off your roof. But in later years Mr. Grauer brought the water across the river to his farm and he was good enough to let the farmers have water free. He had the store and the cattle. It was piped over to the farm, later called Frasea Farms. I can't remember what year, maybe 40 years ago it was brought down the road in a 4" pipe, from the North Shore. In those days, before my Dad died, he liked Clydesdale horses and took quite a few prizes. The cattle, the milk cows were mostly Holstein.

DC – When you say your father won prizes for his horses, did he go to New Westminster to the Fair?

Ralph – Yes. I can remember when I was quite young, we took the horse and buggy and drive to New Westminster and stay at cousins, Kelly's [?] and stayed there for two or three days and went to the exhibition.

DC – You never took dairy to New Westminster? When you took your horses to the Fair how did you take them?

Ralph – They were attached to the fancy wagon. The Fair was in Richmond, located at the end of Cambie at River Road. Close to where the Methodist Church came from.

DC – Was that July 1st or May?

Ralph – I don't remember, it must have been rather late, because vegetables were exhibited so it had to be at least August.

DC – Do you remember games being played? Or racing?

Ralph – No. No racing that I can think of. I remember one time when Dad was living someone showed him how to exhibit Oats and he got a World Prize for it. That would have been about 1910. He got a diploma and I think a hundred dollar prize which was good in those days. My father in probably 1905, there was a man named Arnold, the head of Dominion Trust and he had visions of docks and boats coming in to what is now Iona Island and was McMillan Island, long before the sewage plant. Mr. Arnold gave my Dad and Mr. Laing option money. He was going to buy the farm at \$1500/acre. It didn't work out too good and he took it so badly he committed suicide. My Dad got around \$13,000.00 in option money and Mr. Thomas Laing father of Richard and Art Laing got enough to build a house and barn on Grauer Road. I recall the first church and manse by the Army & Navy & Veterans Club is now, the Presbyterian Church. I have a faint recollection as I was about 6 years old.

[This is where this tape ended. The rest is from the end of another tape that was mostly blank.]

The first minister was Mr. Logan and later Mr. White. Most of the congregation came from Marpole, over the Marpole Bridge.

About 1910 or 1912 it was decided to build a church in Marpole closer to most people. A church was built at 72nd and Hudson Street. When the Presbyterians and Methodists united, most of the congregation had to leave that church. They built another church at 67th and Hudson, Marpole United and we went by democrat horse and buggy every Sunday morning. Dad was an elder there and later I became one of the managers of the church. In later years a church was built on Sea Island and I transferred membership.

I married later in life at age of 44 and my wife died of TB three years later. Ralph McDonald has two daughters, Mary in Steveston and Catherine in Williams Lake.

*Transcribed by Sharon Bordeleau 2018
Sea Island Heritage Society.*