

The following transcript of
Roger Doucet's interview
on

Memories and Music

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWEE: Roger Doucet TAPE NO: 19
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THEME: Blind River, amusements, farming, the Depression, the Bigwood area, work at Inco, carpentry.

D.M. Now we're going to have a chat with a very interesting gentleman Mr. Roger Doucet. He has a most interesting hobby, he's lead a most interesting life. I know you're going to enjoy hearing about ah, himself and his experiences. Now ah Mr. Doucet when, when did you retire from Inco?

R.D. I retired the first of May 1974.

D.M. How many years had you been with the company?

R.D. 21 years.

D.M. What were you doing when you retired sir?

R.D. I was working in the safety department as a dry man.

D.M. Correct. Well now we know that you had ah, reasons for retiring a little ahead of time, there was something you wanted to do. So let's get right onto it. Where, where are you from? Where were you born?

R.D. I was born in Shawinagan Falls, Quebec.

D.M. In what year Rog?

R.D. 1917.

D.M. But you didn't grow up in Shawinagan Falls.

R.D. No I was just about a year old and the parents left to come back to Ontario. Mother was from Ontario then.

D.M. Right

R.D. And a

D.M. Whereabouts in Ontario?

R.D. A, St. Joe's Island, St. Joseph's Island.

D.M. Ah yes. Well now ah, so did your mother and father then settle down or . . . build a house or set a home in St. Joseph's Island.

R.D. The ah, they, they came to Blind River shortly after they came to St. Joseph's which his mother's parents were there.

D.M. Right.

R.D. So they settled down in Blind River.

D.M. Um, this would be around about 1918 then, eh?

R.D. Just about 19

D.M. (unintelligible)

R.D. Yeah about 1918.

D.M. You would grow up in Blind River then Rog. What are your memories of growing up there? I mean as a kid going to school there.

R.D. Well a, yeah it was . . . we were raised in Blind River until the age of 16 and went, did some schooling there.

D.M. Right.

R.D. And a

D.M. What I'm getting at is ah, first of all is there, is there anybody listening, who might be listening to this broadcast that you went to school with in a, Blind River back in those days?

R.D. Oh it's possible I already met some of the fellows I went to school with that works for Inco.

D.M. Right. What are their names?

R.D. Oh ah jeez, right off hand I don't know if I can remember.

D.M. Some times Roger when you're getting interviewed like this you, your mind goes blank.

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. I know it happens to all of us, eh?

R.D. Yeah.

- D.M. What I'm trying to a, get at is, did you go ah, did you play baseball or did you play hockey or what went on there?
- R.D. Oh we amused ourselves like playing hockey amongst ourselves and playing just playing ball everyone used to play ball at school, there was a period at school.
- D.M. Right.
- R.D. Played some hockey at school.
- D.M. Also you a, you had a pretty good, practically hockey team of your own didn't you? I mean how many brothers and sisters did you have?
- R.D. Yeah there were 9 brothers, of course, there was, some of them were young enough too, eh?
- D.M. Yeah.
- R.D. But a
- D.M. You were about the middle of this group, eh?
- R.D. Well the fourth
- D.M. The fourth
- R.D. The fourth and the final, yeah. There's two sisters and then a brother and myself.
- D.M. We're, we're going to get around a little bit later to talking about them. But, now getting ready for the broadcast it seems that or it seems to me you said that your father then was working at Blind River. But we're getting onto ah, around the late 20's or something when times started to get a little tough, is that right or you were raised on a farm, is that
- R.D. Well it's, when the Depression started in '29, that's where he got out of work . . . he was working as a carpenter and there was no more work. So he rented a farm with a large family he could make a good garden and er, we had a lot of vegetables. We had a few cows and so on.
- D.M. You know that, that almost seems like a, like another age, another era and yet here a man a, a fine gentleman doing the best he could for his family, rented a farm and, and the idea being you, you might sort of live off it, eh? Was that the idea?
- R.D. Yes this was the idea more or less because, because you couldn't, couldn't buy anything you had no money you know,

it dropped, it dropped so fast, the market dropped so fast and er, then, that we had the vegetables and potatoes and we had the cow, we, we used to milk the cow . . . the best thing to have you know.

D.M. So you, you ate anyway, eh?

R.D. Oh yes we, we always had lots to eat

D.M. (unintelligible)

R.D. Mother, mother was good cook, she always used to bake the bread you know, 15, 16 big breads there and a bunch of boys jump in that, it didn't last very long.

D.M. Those were hard, those weren't easy times but I doubt, you look back on those at not being all that bad I guess eh?

R.D. No when you think of it you know we weren't ah, easy or anything but we didn't know anything else, that time came on we, we lived the best we could then, eh and we

D.M. Everybody, everybody in the area was, the most people were pretty along the same boat, eh?

R.D. I guess so, yeah.

D.M. Well I repeat it another, another year that, that seems like a thousand years ago but it wasn't. Now ah, then you were ah, on the farm to 30, 31 up until about 33 and then did you not tell me that a, there were, that word from a brother-in-law about something of a subdivision opening up around Bigwood or something and you moved down there. What was that story?

R.D. Now well a, Ted and Betsy a brother-in-law he had a, he took up a lot as a settler and ah, it was all opened for everybody that wanted to take a lot because there was no work and the government is trying to place people on the ah, on the bush farms or, so they can clear it up and make a living out of it and then you could get relief from the government. So that's why dad moved and came and had a look at that, out you know where they have the subdivision.

D.M. So this is a better deal than he had anyway 'cause he was renting where he was, eh?

R.D. Yeah and

D.M. O.K. go ahead.

R.D. And then a, so he took a lot there and I took a lot too, I was supposed to be 18 I wasn't but I went ahead and did it anyway my brother and I, he took a lot and a,

D.M. Well good for you.

R.D. And ah, we got \$5 a month from the government, Conservative government, Bennett government and ah, we made our own

D.M. Politicians

R.D. Yeah . . . in those days.

D.M. (unintelligible) right.

R.D. You know it was \$80 for the lot, but it was \$20 a year. But today in the Depression they didn't like that kind of payment on it.

D.M. I guess not.

R.D. 'Cause we were getting \$5 a month relief for I guess two years, the time we were on there and a, then we'd (unintelligible) venison . . . cure rabbits and partridge (unintelligible)

D.M. So you were eating again anyway with meat and

R.D. (unintelligible) yes a lot of meat you know, oh yeah.

D.M. Suppose you could grow some vegetables too I suppose.

R.D. Yeah well we did that you know cleared a piece of land for to make a good garden.

D.M. Well you know this, this sounds you'd almost think you'd make a movie out of ah, of like the Americans, tearing out to, to the Great West.

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. But ah, you then, first of all let's get Bigwood located. It's, it's not far from Sudbury eh?

R.D. It's about 40 miles south of Sudbury.

D.M. Right.

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. And you um, you then became sort of a bachelor farmer, you built your own cabin, right?

R.D. Yeah well with all the bunch there at the house you know, all the boys. So I figured well all the older ones had taken my lots so I went ahead and built my own shack and ah, cut the logs down and square them up and skid them out

and they had chums there, who gave us a hand to, one man in each corner to have build it up. What do you call that . . . to put up those log shacks.

D.M. Yeah, yeah.

R.D. And they (unintelligible) stones there.

D.M. Built (unintelligible) there.

R.D. (unintelligible)

D.M. Right.

R.D. And ah,

D.M. Great now

R.D. Fixed it all up.

D.M. It that, that wouldn't be standing still, would it? Still, still standing, would you have any idea?

R.D. Well no, somebody torn down for stack wood two years ago.

D.M. But it was standing up two

R.D. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

D.M. Did you ever go back and take a look at it?

R.D. Well ah, oh yes, we know, used to go hunting back there often, you know, yeah used to

D.M. Think back on the old days in Bigwood eh?

R.D. Yeah, oh yeah. It's good hunting back there.

D.M. Well how . . . now we're going to get around to it, I know that you have a great interest in the particular skill of carpentry Mr. Doucet. But, which I think you got from your father, who was quite a carpenter himself. Now how long were you in this ah, cabin at Bigwood.

R.D. Yeah we were there up to, to 19, 1940. I got married in 1940 and that's

D.M. Well then you were there for 30, you were there about 5 years ago.

R.D. About 5 years I'd say.

D.M. Whom, whom did you marry?

R.D. Married Georgette Dupuis from Noelville.

D.M. Which is near Bigwood too.

R.D. Yeah it's a little farther than Bigwood, about 8 miles farther up.

D.M. Where did you meet Georgette?

R.D. Well I met her on a, on a party one evening.

D.M. I see, was this ah, sort of a dance, square dance sort of a thing?

R.D. It was a euchre party at the church there, they had their own halls and they made parties you know. Make a little extra money I guess and ah, we used to go to those euchre parties and that's where ah, happened to go there one, one night and that's when I run into her sister.

D.M. You saw a young lady in this, you could, you liked and this was the right one, eh?

R.D. No ah

D.M. Be careful now, she's going to be listening.

R.D. Yes and then ah, no I was, I was there long enough that night and ah, it happened that ah, knew her sister I guess, had, we had seen them, seen them around but anyway. Played cards with her that night and then finally ah, we got invited over you know and started going out once in a while, finally we were going out steady.

D.M. Very, very good.

R.D. I'd ended up with a marriage.

D.M. Marvelous, marvelous.

R.D. Happily marriage.

D.M. Good, good. Now ah, too bad you attempted, we haven't got you here to tell the people what you, what, what you saw in Roger. We'd ask you whether he was a good dancer or not? I hope we're not going to ask him that, we have, don't want to embarrass him. Now ah, I gather Roger that ah, no honeymoon, eh.

R.D. No.

D.M. No money for a honeymoon right.

R.D. Well those days, there's just a house wedding you know.

D.M. Yeah.

R.D. At the bride's place and

D.M. Right in the

R.D. Like, like the parents and that, was those days.

D.M. You, and then back to your cabin with your

R.D. Yeah, yeah.

D.M. In the woods at Bigwood, eh?

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. Well how long did you ah, stay in the cabin.

R.D. We stayed there just the winter. I had cut a bunch of logs and stove wood and had to take that out. In the spring I went, went to the farm I had bought near Noelville.

D.M. Well now tell us about this farm that you had bought. Now how come you bought the farm, what did you pay for it, and what, what were the circumstances there sir?

R.D. Well I bought the farm, I bought the farm with all of \$2, the mortgage on it \$450

D.M. Right.

R.D. And it was \$50 a year so finally the old father agreed to take the \$2 as a down payment until I got the \$50. The papers were all drawn up and signed and sealed and I had a farm.

D.M. Very incredible.

R.D. Yes.

D.M. Now I'll give you \$2 for the farm, any time now.

R.D. Well it was worth more than that but ah

D.M. Oh I guess

R.D. 10, 15 years after.

D.M. Oh I gather it's worth a thousand times that, I, I mean I don't know but it's just incredible. You know it seems like again another era, another age.

R.D. Well ah

D.M. But ah

R.D. Times weren't too expensive in those days, you could buy a good farm that ah, no cattle on it for 2500 or 2000 you know.

D.M. Right.

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. O.K. so we got you then, you moved then with your wife to the farm outside Noelville.

R.D. Yeah, yeah.

D.M. Well tell us about moving in there, you, you didn't have ah, did you not have to live in a milk shed or something 'til you got a house.

R.D. Oh yeah, well ah, well ah, there was no buildings, eh, so I was, the milk shed that was there didn't look too bad, clean it all up, fix it inside and we lived there for the summer 'til I built the house. Then after in the fall I removed, moved back in the house and we finished it with time.

D.M. Have you and your wife ever gone back to take a look at that milk shed?

R.D. No we moved it close to the, the house after and we used it as a milk shed, put the separator in there and a lot of other stuff.

D.M. I, I like that story. So . . . so now Rog we've got you ah, living on the farm near Noelville, the, the year is what? About, it is by the 1940's by now.

R.D. Well no that's past the 1940, I say 1942, 1943.

D.M. And ah, how did it work out? Did you just make farming, did you buy some cattle tell us about that.

R.D. As time went on we ah, got cattle and calves and so on and . . . we raised them to make, to get cows, get a bunch of cows, finally get a bunch of them and I framed a barn and a machinery shed and got machineries and worked in the bush 'til I got some money.

D.M. You're turning into a capitalist now, eh?

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. You got a farm.

R.D. You got to be on the move steady.

D.M. I guess, did, did you not ah, buy another farm.

R.D. Well I bought another farm behind Dowling for the past 3, there was running water on it. It was quite handy for the young stock.

D.M. So then we got you then doing mixed farming if you like near Noelville through the years what at '44, '45, and '46.

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. You don't sound too enthusiastic about it, you didn't make the money doing that, eh?

R.D. Well once I got equipped with machinery and tractor and all I needed to cultivate the farm and I had the cattle, well I wanted to have, get a quota of milk. So a . . . people were there but oh quota they, they got it and the new ones couldn't get in. So ah, that's how come I, in 1949, 1950 that's where I sold everything, the last I was well equipped you know. It's too much work for the money.

D.M. But you'd, you'd get a few dollars for a, a great deal more than what you paid for it, by this time eh?

R.D. Oh yeah I, I made a

D.M. Make a few dollars on the

R.D. Oh yeah I made pretty good when I sold it.

D.M. Right.

R.D. Oh yes.

D.M. Also I did, was your wife, did she not become ill about that time.

R.D. Yeah she got ill there, she got sick and she had to be admitted to the hospital so during that time I got pretty well disgusted about farming working so hard and so on. Well we're making a good living but it's ah, you know kids are all young and we had 5 of them then, 5 or 6, 7 of them before we left the farm and ah, no help I had to hire a man if I wanted the help and even there I hadn't good machinery. So that . . . never enough money for that, so finally I made up my mind that I could do something else than that, you know. The, the wages were getting better so I got out

D.M. You packed in after 13 years of farming and went looking for a job right?

R.D. Yeah, yeah.

D.M. Where'd you come to, to Inco of course eh?

R.D. Well I was on highway 69 and they were building it. I was there for a couple of months and finally I ended up looking for sort of a better job, steady job. So then I went to see for Inco. That's where I got on.

D.M. Now you, you were getting ready for the show you told, I thought was a cute story about ah, getting in line, a good spot in line with Inco and then losing your place. What was that?

R.D. Well I was in the line up there and ah, there was quite a few guys . . . about 50 or 60 guys lined up right down the stairs and ah, I was there early, I was about the 10th one I guess. So he took two guys there, one after the other and I, I was included in that. So he asked me a few questions, I forgot what it was, anyway I told him that I wanted a steady job, you know and try Inco because it was steady, it's a big outfit and so on. If I've got to carry a lunch pail I was just about try to get in a good place. And a, so O.K. go and sit down. So (unintelligible) and you had to go work afternoon shift. So I gets over to telling the man you know um . . . you got to tell him because you had to go work afternoon shift and I came, wanted to come back in to sit there. (unintelligible) Get in line with the others, he says. And it took me about a couple of weeks maybe before I'd get in again.

D.M. You learned a lesson, eh?

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. Well now having got in I think that you got the same treatment that lots of the men got when they first started out when, work wasn't too easy at the start there.

R.D. No I was a number 8 apprentice, copper reserve they were cleaning out, they had to put it down, it was pretty hot in there yet and I thought it was pretty terrible. I was used to working in the bush, eh and ah, I was going to quit anyway but from November to the other I, I was there 21 years.

D.M. Not bad, all right sir . . . were you not, did you have served in the, in the coal plant for a time too.

R.D. Yes a couple of years in the nickel reserve and the time I got transferred to the coal plant (unintelligible) coal, I was there 13 years.

D.M. And, and some where along the line then you hurt your back, is that right?

R.D. Well there was a cutback there in the years and, I had to go back down conveyors in the winter time, down here, the coal comes down the chute in chunks and you got to blast the chutes and so on, so well I opened a chute there and I guess I wasn't placed right there and I hurt my back and that was.

D.M. So you took it a little easier then during your remaining time, eh?

R.D. Yeah I was really done, eh? I had to take it easy, I still got to take it easy.

D.M. But I know that all the time that you were working even on the farm and later at Inco that you had this interest in carpentry. Well what I mean by that rustic furniture so that you can do that well now I can pack it in now and then go to work at this thing that I want to do. Now before we get to that, what family do you have Rog?

R.D. I have 8 children.

D.M. Tell me where are they now and what are they doing?

R.D. Six girls and 2 boys.

D.M. Right.

R.D. Well, well Ellen works at Paquette's Men's Wear, she's a, a secretary there, and Connie she works at um Gougeon Real Estate, secretary, and er Gertrude she's, she took the course hair dresser, as a hair dresser but she's, she's at home now and . . . don't like moving I guess and Fran she works at, you, you know Conrad (unintelligible) Levine's.

D.M. Yeah I've, I've heard of the firm, right.

R.D. And er, Bernadette she's a registered nurse, they live in Ottawa and he teaches there and so she, they had to move there.

D.M. Right.

R.D. And a . . . Michelle, Michelle, she, they both going to school and she took up this course through Manpower's for Day Care, Day Care, Day Care Centres.

D.M. Yeah, yeah.

R.D. And Raymond works for Falconbridge and Norm, Norman is at a, working for a kind of insurance in Cornwall.

D.M. Now that, that takes care of, of the family, eh?

R.D. Of the whole family, yeah.

D.M. Well now here you were as you told me before the show, you weren't feeling all that energetic, I mean your back was bothering you a bit. You and you had a real interest in rustic furniture and ah, from what you've told me you've got all the orders you can handle in, in, in this furniture. I want to ask you a little bit about it. Now what . . . what, what got you interested in furniture, building rustic furniture?

R.D. Well I always liked to work in the bush and I always liked to work with wood. I ah, I built a few house, you know in Sudbury and if I move from one to another, keep selling them, you make extra money, done that part time. Then, there I built my own house in Val Caron and ah, there was something for, as a hobby. Like for my retiring days and then I, I, I like to work with wood and ah, when I started that I seen some of that in Quebec and I've seen some of that in Sudbury and ah, I thought I'm going to try to do that. I, sort of like that kind of furniture.

D.M. O.K. now describe your furniture to me now as we were talking before the show I told you that I, I didn't know much about furniture. I, I, I like a lot of people I've heard or I've seen pictures of old English Chippendale and, and I know what they mean by sort of early Canadian pine furniture. I think they mean by sort of early Canadian pine furniture. I think they mean mostly Ontario furniture but your, what you build is a little different you build it . . . you don't make sort of square . . .

R.D. No

D.M. Force the pieces you build it right out of the, out of the wood. Is that right? Tell us about it.

R.D. You, you leave the wood as is, natural and you peel, peel it in the spring when the sap is on and you take the bark off and you let it dry 4 or 5 months inside so there's no cracks you know and then you just cut out the length you want and ah, sand the knots down and where it's rough you sand it. And a, then you set it (unintelligible) like rungs you know and drill a hole and stick them in there with glue and the wood remains natural. You just, you have to, it's different size for the legs and then the back and then the rungs on the center of the back they're a little smaller to a make them, well to design for my own and a

D.M. Yeah right.

R.D. It looks pretty good that way and I keep making it that way.

D.M. Roger, I, I, you're one of the few people I have met who sort of are able to do exactly in this, in this world what they want to do. Now do you make tables too and, and

R.D. Oh yes.

D.M. Like that.

R.D. Oh yes.

D.M. Well what are your tables? Are they round or square or both or . . . do, do, make a design on your tables?

R.D. Any, any type rectangle, oval, round tables, coffee tables, end tables and a (unintelligible)

D.M. They all, they all have this rustic a, what do you do for the, for the top of the table?

R.D. Well I use this B.C. cedar, a 1½" thick for the top and then I use the round wood for the legs, like a bit of wood about, let's say about 3", 3½" round for the legs.

D.M. We're talking now about, about a dining room table, are we or

R.D. Well that's, that's the way it's done.

D.M. You, what do you do import this cedar from B.C. then do you.

R.D. No we buy it in the lumber yards here in Sudbury. I buy it at Laberge's, Laberge Lumber, the cedar.

D.M. What size pieces does it come in?

R.D. Well, well it's 2 by, by 2 by 10 and 2 by 12, 16, 14 feet long and I cut it up with the machines, with the saws I have, cut it all up.

D.M. Right.

R.D. Yeah.

D.M. So a, what about things like chesterfields?

- R.D. Well a chesterfield, it's a length up to eight feet but I put two 2 by 10 for the seat likewise in it glued together with clamps and the rest of it is round wood. Natural round wood.
- D.M. What about the cushions for the seat and the arms and so on.
- R.D. Well people do cushion the, go into upholstery and they get them made. They're two inches thick, we use two inch rubber and a, they use this a, foil cloth for covers over them and they, they put a string at each corner, you know. They can't tie it so they, you know that there place for the backs and maybe three cushions in the back and three cushions on the seat and they're tied up there with the strings after the rungs. So they stay in place.
- D.M. Well then, as I say I've not seen your, your, your work Roger but what, this is clearly an unmistakeably rustic furniture that you build then.
- R.D. It's the word rustic, it's the word rustic.
- D.M. And it's to say yes, if you're, if you wanted a sort of a rustic recreation room or something like this, it's the way to do it, eh?
- R.D. That's, that's what it's for, it's for rec rooms, summer camps. That's what people go for because you can't break that
- D.M. That's good enough, I think that's more than can be said for some of that mass produced
- R.D. Can't say.
- D.M. Furniture that we get now a . . . I don't want to a, put you on the spot or anything Rog but what . . . what would you charge for a chair for instance?
- R.D. Well I sold a few rocking chairs I, I well they've been sold up to \$89.95.
- D.M. You're starting to sort of . . .
- R.D. But a
- D.M. Sound like a department store here. Getting a little commercial here.
- R.D. Well most, mostly I sell them \$60 you know it's an awful price for it I'd charged what it should be it's, it's close to \$90 for a rocking chair.

D.M. Now how is business?

R.D. Well it could be very good if I'd hire people. Just for myself I, it's a hobby eh and ah, I just, I just do that what I can do when I feel like working wherever I work. If I want to go fishing, I go fishing 'cause I like fishing.

D.M. I'd say that's a great philosophy.

R.D. Oh yeah.

D.M. So we won't get on the air here and advertise you and tell people to come and try out for your chairs. They probably know where to find you anyway I guess.

R.D. Oh if, if I happen to sell a piece of furniture to some people, you know they have friends. The first thing you know they have their friends.

D.M. Yeah.

R.D. That's the way it goes and then their friends and their friends. That's the way it keeps going.

D.M. It kind of screwball. Well friends and neighbours I, I hope you've enjoyed this interview half as much as we have. We're talking to a, we, we would say a happy man, we're talking to a, a, a man who a, didn't have it easy as a child who, who you heard him tell us about how it was as a boy, he had to leave school early that he had to do a man's work on a farm a large family, his father, a carpenter out of work had to, to, took a farm out to see if he could feed the family with what he could earn off a farm. You've, you've heard about a boy of 17 or 18 or whatever he was taking out land at Bigwood, building his own cabin on it. Heard about, moved later to a farm, selling your farm and moving to Inco, retiring when he felt that he could retire and could afford to retire and now works as the hours that he wants to work building rustic furniture. Roger Doucet retired May 1st, 1974 after 21 years with Inco at which time he was in the Safety Department. Let me say Mr. Doucet it's been a pleasure and a privilege to have you with us on "Memories & Music."

R.D. Same here, thanks very much.