The following transcript of George Robb’s interview on 

_Memories and Music_ 
(broadcast between 1974-1976) 

was created by the Sudbury Public Library as part of a 

_Summer Canada Project_ 

in 1982.
INTerviewee: George Robb
POSITION: Line foreman
DATE:
INTERVIEWER: Don MacMillan

THEME: - rural life around Sudbury, early in the century
- working in the mines
- description of Sudbury in 1909

D.M. Now friends and neighbours we're going to have a chat with a most interesting gentleman who is our guest today. His name is Mr. George Robb. When did you retire from Inco, Inco Mr. Robb?


D.M. And how many years had you spent with the company?

G.R. 45 years and 3 months.

D.M. Well that's gotta be getting on towards the record, eh? I never checked this out, do you know whose got the longest service?

G.R. No I, I couldn't tell you that.

D.M. But 45 years and a, 3 months has got to be up pretty close there, eh?

G.R. Oh yes, yes.

D.M. Well that, that's goes back a while. What, what were you doing when you retired Mr. Robb?

G.R. I was a line foreman in, in charge of all the power lines and well they called them supervisors in those days and in charge of all the linemen, line trucks and equipment, all outside power lines.

D.M. Well now we're going to have to start at the beginning of this story. Where you from? Where were you born Mr. Robb?
G.R. I was born in Turbine, Ontario.

D.M. And a, where is Turbine?

G.R. Well it's about 25 miles west of Sudbury, on the Sault line.

D.M. Yeah well that's, of course, pretty familiar territory now. But a, not when you were born. What, what year were you born sir?

G.R. I was born on November the 21st in 1902.

D.M. Wowwee, 1902 that takes us we're, right, we're way back to about the Boer War time or Queen Victoria, are we not?

G.R. Yeah. I think King George was . . .

D.M. King George . . .

G.R. I think so, yes.

D.M. The fifth maybe, eh?

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Well now . . . how about your parents was your father from that part of the world or where did he come from?

G.R. No he came from England and his family originally came from Dundee in Scotland.

D.M. And what brought him out here?

G.R. Well I guess he . . . he wanted to see Canada.

D.M. Yeah.

G.R. He came out here.

D.M. Young fellow, I guess he was on a farm in England was he at the time or . . .

G.R. No, no.

D.M. City boy, was he?

G.R. They were in, there father was a, (unintelligible) manufacturers and I guess possibly he worked there, outside of him going to school and . . .

D.M. The only point that, then, that makes it more interesting I think is that he came to Canada and I guess took a homestead then. Did he (unintelligible).
G.R. Yes he did, yes.
D.M. Did he ever talk to you much about why he settled there or (unintelligible).
G.R. No, no he didn't and I guess a, possibly he liked it there and . . .
D.M. Right.
G.R. Then mother came out a few years after and I don't know just what year dad came out. It was in around 1890 something anyway.
D.M. And a . . . now your mother, he had known your mother back in England?
G.R. Oh yes, yes.
D.M. But she didn't come to the Turbine area.
G.R. No she didn't come out here when he did.
D.M. She was . . .
G.R. She came out a couple of years after . . .
D.M. Down to, you were telling me down to a . . .
G.R. Well, er
D.M. What used to be called Berlin right.
G.R. Yeah, they were married in a place called Berlin.
D.M. Which is now Kitchener.
G.R. Kitchener, yep.
D.M. Right. Well so your father then he homesteaded at Turbine right?
G.R. That's right.
D.M. A . . . and he'd, he did pretty well eh, he prospered all right and he, how did he manage to work a farm there. Tell, tell us something about the farm.
G.R. Oh, oh, he, of course you can set fires where we like in those days and burn the bush up so we got a lot of land cleared.
D.M. Yes.
G.R. We eventually got about 125 acres cleared out of 360 and a, of course we had a good sized barn could hold a lot of stock, sheep and pigs and chickens and ...

D.M. Well that sounds like a great, great place for a boy to grow up, eh?

G.R. Yes it was, yeah on the farm.

D.M. And a, your mother you were telling me died at what, 96.

G.R. Yes mother was 96 when she died.

D.M. So I guess the early work on the farm didn't do her any harm, eh?

G.R. No I don't think so, I think those people live longer then we do. I guess.

D.M. That could be. Now a, tell us more about those, you were on early years, that is to say when you're 8 or 9 or 10 years old, you ... you'd go to a school. You started a school there did you in, in the area.

G.R. Yes, yes. We had a, there was just a one big room, large room school. And a, we used to walk about a mile and a half to school.

D.M. And that was reading, writing and arithmetic I suppose.

G.R. Reading, writing and arithmetic mostly in those days. We got a little bit of history.

D.M. Do you remember any of the stories you read or any of your readers or anything like that.

G.R. Oh yes there was, I don't suppose, maybe, maybe you would know some of them too. But I remember the, there was quite a bit of poetry in some of them you know.

D.M. Yeah.

G.R. Like Old Two ball Cane you know.

D.M. Two ball Cane was ...

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. The man of might, is that right? Yeah that's ...

G.R. Two ball Cane was a man of might, when days on earth was young.
D.M. And a, Fierce red light from his furnace bright ...  
G.R. Bright ...  
D.M. His strokes of his hammer rung, eh?  
G.R. Strokes of his hammer rung, yeah.  
D.M. I don't know but I, I, I think there's still teaching that in high school for a ...  
G.R. They are.  
D.M. They may be ...  
G.R. Oh I don't know. I, I haven't, know those books, I think they're all out of circulation now.  
D.M. Maybe eh? I'll be darned.  
G.R. 'Cause my wife is a school teacher and they have all new books now.  
D.M. Yeah, yeah. Well I know and a, we've talked on this show before about the new methods, the new, the new math and the new reading.  
G.R. Oh yes, yes.  
D.M. And not everybody seems to be for it. Now a, another point you made as we were getting ready for the show was that, that you didn't make too much money on a farm back in those days but you ate pretty well, eh?  
G.R. That's right, yeah.  
D.M. What was it, you said kids today.  
G.R. Well kids today don't know what good food taste like.  
D.M. Right. I a ...  
G.R. 'Cause we had, we had lots of it in those days. Most all they do today is ... potato chips and pop.  
D.M. Right, right.  
G.R. Hamburgers and wieners.  
D.M. I, I, there'll be a lot of people would agree with you Mr. Robb.  
G.R. Yeah.
D.M. So a ... 

G.R. We never saw that stuff in our day.

D.M. No. How many farms would be in this, in this community around Turbine there?

G.R. Oh there were around 8 or 10 somewhere around that, yeah.

D.M. And I guess you would all know each other.

G.R. Oh yes, yes, we all know each other and of course they're all gone now them farms.

D.M. I was going to say have you ever been back to visit the old farms.

G.R. Oh yes, oh yes. Most of them are all grown up now and bush and stuff. People died and families have gone.

D.M. Yeah.

G.R. And they sold them. Possibly I think the Nickel company bought some of them.

D.M. Well it's a new world, a new way of living.

G.R. Oh yeah, that's right, yeah.

D.M. Still that, that was a community and a thriving one back around 1909.

G.R. Oh the farm we had was a, one that's all going to pieces now.

D.M. Yeah.

G.R. Some, someone else bought it, somebody from Toronto and a, they never lived on it and it's still, was rented for a while. I think it's, it's all going to pieces now.

D.M. In a way I, it's, it's kind of heartbreaking to look back on, on, on ... 

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. But I, I suppose that happens in a sense to almost everybody. I mean nothing lasts forever.

G.R. No, no.

D.M. But a, after all to find it sort of so close you can just drive out anytime you want to, to take a look at it, you know.
That's right, yeah.

However reversing the process and getting back to a, 1909 again. It seems to me you made your first visit to Sudbury back around about 1909, is that correct?

Yes that's right, 1909.

Will you tell us something about that trip Mr. Robb?

Well I remember getting on the train at 6 o'clock in the morning. It came through our place then, through our little community and a... I think we paid about 7, 70 cents for our fare then from Sudbury to, to Turbine and we got off at the C.P.R. station then. The C.P.R. station used to be where the, used to be... used to be across the tracks and where the King Edward Hotel was. And I remember walking over to Durham Street which was up on posts about 4 feet off the ground.

Is that right? I, I find that, that the sidewalks was... the road of course would be mud.

Oh it was all mud and water, yeah.

The sidewalks were about 4 feet high, eh?

Yeah.

O.K. tell us more about that Mr. Robb.

I remember walking down Durham Street and went into a restaurant for breakfast. I think it was called the Victoria cafe, if I'm not sure. It was run by Chinamen.

All right.

And I think it was somewhere around where the Zellers and other stores is now. And I remember going down the steps off the sidewalk into the restaurant and we only had breakfast.

A big adventure for a 7 year old.

Oh yeah.

What else did you do in town that day?

I remember coming out of the old, well I don't know, dad went to Cochrane hardware and he went to a, a couple of a, retail store where you buy stuff for feed and grain and stuff, seed grain, and potatoes and that stuff. And a, I think we went to Cochrane hardware. That was where we bought the first gun that I remember him having.
D.M. O.K. so at the end of the day you were a...

G.R. It was around, around about noon hour and we went back up on the train home.

D.M. These, this would of course be back in the old days of the steam, eh?

G.R. Oh yes that's right, yeah.

D.M. Wood burning?

G.R. No, that was coal then.

D.M. That was coal.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. But a, you were telling me about some of those early trains that were wood burning and (unintelligible).

G.R. Oh yes, yes.

D.M. Stop and pick up wood along the way.

G.R. That's right, yeah.

D.M. The a...

G.R. My dad used to tell me about right close to where their farm was, they used to have big piles of wood there and the train used to stop there and they'd load the tender up with cord wood to fire the engine with.

D.M. And a, carry on, well it's...

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Nothing like having your fuel out where, you used to go out and cut it, eh?

G.R. Yeah that's right, yeah.

D.M. Now after you finished school, what did you do go to work on, on your father's farm.

G.R. Yes I worked on the farm for a few years.

D.M. And then what did you do?

G.R. And then I left the farm, we went railroading, the Algoma Eastern Railway. That was between Sudbury and Little Current on the...
D.M. What kind of work were you doing?

G.R. We were doing section work and bridge work and construction work.

D.M. That would be ... you know, you'd be 16 or 17 years old, that would be fairly hard work for a young fellow, eh?

G.R. Oh yes but oh kids were rugged in those days you know.

D.M. I guess you'd be carrying ties around some times.

G.R. Oh, oh that ...

D.M. Cracks and places.

G.R. That didn't bother us then. But I don't suppose they do today though.

D.M. No I, I don't know a ...

G.R. When we worked on the railroad then we used to have to, to put in ... take out and put in 75 ties a day.

D.M. It's, that's a fair number.

G.R. Spike them and trim the track. That was ...

D.M. That was, that was the quota eh?

G.R. That was a day's work, some times we were finished at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, some times five, we used to quit at 6.

D.M. Right well there you have it friends a little, a little memorabilia back from those days. Now a, but you a, you're putting in about 3 years as, I think you said with the railroad you got yourself a pass and took a holiday, right sir?

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Where'd you go?

G.R. Oh we came down to Sudbury and ... with another chap and I and we went to Coniston looking for a job. There was no, no work around then. They were building the Coniston Club house at that time and a, the only job we could get there. I think it was about 28 cents an hour or something, 28 or 9, 29 cents an hour. So we left there and came back to Sudbury and went out to the British American Nickel Company which is, which was at Murray Mine then and they had a smelter and a mine there and there were about 200 men waiting at the gate there looking for a job so we couldn't get nothing there. So, so we came back to Sudbury and took the train home.
D.M. Yes but did you not . . . meet somebody on the train that a . . .

G.R. Yes when . . .

D.M. Led to a change of employment or something . . .

G.R. When, when we got on the train McCaslcall got on in Copper Cliff I think he was, he was some kind of a . . . general foreman then them days to go up around the power plants once in a while. There was an electrical engineer, he was in that time I just don't remember what his name was and a, I happened to know him when I was a kid so he asked me where I was going. Well I said, I was going home but I was looking for a job. Well he said. Have you a job now? I said, yes. Well he said what do you want another one for? I said, I want a job with more money.

D.M. Reasonable, reasonable.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. So . . .

G.R. So after 2 or 3 days a phone call came at home for me to go to the O'Donnell roast yards. So we went, I went there and started to work there.

D.M. You mentioned that a couple of fellows that a, who are still in this area you think or maybe around here, who you worked with at that time then.

G.R. Oh yeah there were Cliff Parker, and Reg Raymond and a, Jack Tinkerman and . . .

D.M. Well now, it's a little bit crude eh? In those days it was you don't have the things they have now. You had to crawl around on your hands and knees some times, eh?

G.R. Oh yes some, some times you had to crawl around on your hands and knees to get away from the sulphur smoke.

D.M. Right.

G.R. I mean it was kind of tough working out there too in those days it was quite of crude it was all pick and shovel and wheelbarrow.

D.M. You were young and strong and you were making (unintelligible)

G.R. Oh yes, that's right.

D.M. How long did you stay at that?
G.R. I was there until the spring and then I was transferred from there to Copper Cliff.

D.M. What are you doing in Copper Cliff?

G.R. I started working in the copper reverb and the, the boss's name there then was Joe Workman. He was the general foreman of the reverb so I started to work there and I worked there for a year I think.

D.M. And then what happened?

G.R. And then one day the electrical superintendent came through with a, with the boss and of the building and everything and I was talking to the shift boss. So he came along and he said, Give that man a transfer to come into the line gang for Monday morning, into the electrical department. So that was how I came into the electrical department.

D.M. Wow you had your mind made up for you.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. What a, what an incredible story and, and you a, you stayed there then until retirement, eh?

G.R. I stayed there until retiring, yes.

D.M. Some 40 or more years later, eh?

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Did you, you worked as a labourer for a, first though eh?

G.R. Oh yes I worked as a laborer for 3 or 4 years ... before I got on as, as a lineman, of course, you didn't have many linenmen in those days. In the summer time we had on large crew after the snow was gone and the frost out of the ground. So we could put up poles and do a ... 

D.M. The thing that, that would be ... 

G.R. Do a lot of repair work.

D.M. Mr. Robb you would just literally have to a, you'd learn on the job or your foreman or somebody would tell you do this, or do that or ... 

G.R. Oh that's right, yes.

D.M. Do something, eh?

G.R. You could get a ... these courses you know in electrical business.
D.M. Yeah.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Did you study on the side too some of those things?

G.R. Oh yes, yes.

D.M. Well very good and a, you remained a lineman until a, until when . . .

G.R. 19, I think it was around 1942.

D.M. And then what happened?

G.R. And then I was put on as a, a line, line foreman, I was put on as line foreman, they call them general foreman and I remained there until I was retired.

D.M. Well now as we were getting ready for show here now, you said something about . . . there were some tough days but there were some hard days that evened it out. What was that you said?

G.R. Oh yeah there were, there were a lot of tough days and you know but probably 2 or 3 tough days you had, you always got an easy one.

D.M. Well . . .

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. You can't complain too much about that.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Well now let's go back to those days and we've got you a, a young fellow, a young man about town living in a, Sudbury, working on the . . .


D.M. Well wait a minute you lived at where Millers, Millens . . .

G.R. Mill's Boarding house in . . .

D.M. Where was that?

G.R. In Copper Cliff, Serpentine Street.

D.M. Oh yeah.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Is that still there?
G.R. No it's gone now, it's all torn down. It was, it was next to the fire hall.

D.M. Pretty good food in those days.

G.R. Oh yes, it was good food, yeap, lots, lots of it.

D.M. There maybe somebody listening Mr. Robb who, who a, stayed there as a young fellow maybe he'll give you a call. I hope he does, bring back some memories. Now a, we're, all we're talking now is the 20's, what a, what did you do? Go to dances and movies and stuff?

G.R. Oh yeah we went to dances and movies around and, used to, used to walk maybe 3 or 4 miles at night and go to a dance someplace and out in the country somewhere. There was mostly all square dancing in those days, yeah.

D.M. What about the movie stars, the movies that you wa, what, westerns or anything you, you used to go see.

G.R. Always, mostly, mostly westerns and . . . A few of them, they were all silent movies though, yeah.

D.M. A, what about your brothers and sisters, now how many of them did you have and what did they do?

G.R. I have 4 sisters and 2 brothers.

D.M. And they had not moved to Copper Cliff.

G.R. No, no they stayed out on the farm.

D.M. Oh yes, so they a, where are they now, those, you . . .

G.R. The two girls and two, two brothers are both dead now. They worked for Inco for quite a few years before they were killed, they were killed in a car accident on the railroad track with a train.

D.M. I'll be darned, eh?

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. That's right, right in this area, was it?

G.R. Yeah out in Turbine, out there.

D.M. In Turbine, eh?

G.R. Yes it seemed kind of obvious because they had lived there all their life and to get hit on the . . .
D.M. Yeah.

G.R. The crossing over to home and . . .

D.M. They'd be, they'd be conscience of trains . . .

G.R. Oh yes, that's right.

D.M. Maybe they were too conscious of them.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Or at least they just didn't think about them.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. What about your sisters?

G.R. Well I had four sisters and they eventually got married, they all lived in Sudbury.

D.M. Oh what are they're names now, where are they living?

G.R. Mr. and Mrs. Doug Thom was one of them, her husband died last year. He was an engineer for the International Nickel, draftsman and I had another sister Mrs. Wallace, her husband worked at Frood Mine. He's dead now years ago and a, I had another sister Mrs. Myllynen, they live out in Sudbury here. He's retired now and then I have one single sister, but she died last year.

D.M. By golly you know, you're a, as the years pass the people don't live forever, do they?

G.R. No that's right.

D.M. All we have to do is talk to someone whose been around a while and that becomes pretty evident.

G.R. Yeah, I was just, just even thinking yesterday you know of all the people that's gone.

D.M. Yeah, yeah.

G.R. Since I came to Copper Cliff and around Sudbury you know and . . .

D.M. Oh I guess maybe, eh?

G.R. Oh yes it's . . .

D.M. You go back to 1907 or 1909 that's . . .
G.R. That's right.
D.M. There must be a few.
G.R. Yes.
D.M. But a, on a happier note Mr. Robb you, yourself, you a, you got, you got married, right?
G.R. Yes I was married around 1942 I married a school teacher her name was Mabel Franson.
D.M. Oh yeah, where did you met her?
G.R. She came from Nairnville and I met her up there and I happened to be working up there at the time and I met her there.
D.M. Where did you live after you were married?
G.R. Well she taught school in Beaver Lake for quite a few years, I think she taught school in Nairn. She taught school in Whitefish and I think she taught school in Naughton and then she came to Sudbury to teach and she's still teaching school.
D.M. Is, is she?
G.R. Yeah.
D.M. Well great. Now what family, you have a . . .
G.R. I just have one daughter . . .
D.M. Oh yes.
G.R. And her name is a Elizabeth Ruth Hugh.
D.M. And a, where is she living now and what's . . .
G.R. She lives out in Walden township and they have two little boys.
D.M. Oh yes.
G.R. Her husband works at the, on Nickel Refinery, at the Copper Refinery.
D.M. Well now a, Mr. Robb, I noticed that ring of yours, that's a, is that a masonic ring that you're wearing there.
G.R. Yes that's a masonic ring.
D.M. When, when did you get involved with the masons?

D.M.  And you got, stayed with the, you've gone through the various stages (unintelligible).

G.R.  Yes I went all through the chairs, and I was a past master 1949 I guess I went into the chair in 1948.

D.M.  Right well now the next thing I note Mr. Robb is that you've done a considerable travelling . . . to Europe for instance. Now a, tell us about the trip to England. When was it and what was the purpose and what happened over there?

G.R.  I think it was about . . . about 4 or 5 years ago when I first went, when we first went there. My wife got a leave from school, sabatical leave and we went over and toured England and then we went around through . . . oh Belgium, Holland, and Russia and all those countries.

D.M.  That would be interesting. How did you travel, by a, you went was a tour party by bus, is that correct?

G.R.  Yes we travelled on tour parties by bus.

D.M.  Now something you told me that I . . . was interested in as we were getting ready. Was that you liked Norway, you liked the people and that you liked the children? They, they all spoke English.

G.R.  Oh yes.

D.M.  Now what was that story there?

G.R.  Oh yes I, when we toured in Norway, I liked Norway very much. I liked the people, I liked the country very much if, if you've ever seen British Columbia, you've seen Norway that's what it looks like.

D.M.  Oh yes, yes.

G.R.  And I liked the children very much they seemed to be very courteous and kind people you know . . . and most of the children are well behaved and I asked two or three little children about speaking English. Oh, he says, we got to learn it in school.

D.M.  As good a reason as any, now also I know Mr. Robb that you toured in Russia. Now you're, you're a, observations were a little different from some of those that from some people bring back. You were told us about going where you wanted, taking your pictures, tell us about you're, now things worked out in, in Russia and Moscow.
G.R. Well things were very good there, we found the people good and, they never bothered us even at the border like going in to and coming into Russia or going out of Russia. As soon as I handed in my passbook and they never even bothered my baggage or luggage, they said, No Canadian, take your baggage there, eh?

D.M. Think you were hockey player, eh?

G.R. Yeah but a, everything was very good in Russia, we found it a very nice, clean country. The people were all well dressed, they seemed to be well behaved... and one thing I know this, you never saw children on the street at nights. And a, we could go any place we want, wanted to. We used to go ride bus well down Red Square and underground subways and travelled every place we wanted to. We took pictures where we liked and a, nobody bothered us from the time we went there until we left.

D.M. Well, well there you have it friends that's, that's a, Mr. George Robb speaking and, and that's been his experience over there.

G.R. Yeah.

D.M. Well now Mr. Robb we're a, you've spent a long time with International Nickel, we've figured it out 45 years, 3 months and so on with the company. I guess... you must have fought a good deal with the company to stay that long with it, right?

G.R. That's right and...

D.M. Do...

G.R. My impression always was that if you went to work in the morning with the idea of doing a day's work and getting paid for it, well nobody would say anything to you.

D.M. And I guess maybe... would I be correct in saying if you were giving advice to a young fellow that would be it, eh?

G.R. Yes I, yes I would but you don't get a day's work out of them today though. If you went to work in those days, you got paid for a day's work, you done a day's work.

D.M. Well times have changed in, in many areas. Well thank you Mr. Robb. Friends we're, our guest today has been Mr. George Robb who retired in 1968, after 45 years and 3 months with International Nickel... at which time he was a, a line foreman. Thank you Mr. Robb very much for coming and sharing your memories with us on Memories & Music.
G.R. Thank you very much.