

Gerald Comeau

Interviewed by Sue Amero, Nov. 22, 2000



Q. O.K. What is your full name?

A. Gerald John Comeau.

Q. And who were your parents?

A. Reg Comeau and a....Elizabeth Comeau.

Q. O.K. And what was your mother's maiden name?

A. A.....Dugas.

Q. O.K. And who were your grandparents?

A. A....Arthur Dugas and a....Helen Dugas and a.....Ned Comeau and Helen Comeau.

Q. O.K.

And when were you born?

A. In 1933.

Q. And where were you born?

A. Just up the road here, a couple hundred yards.

Q. How large was your family?

A. Well they was six....six of us. Three boys and three girls.

Q. O.K. And where do you fit in, in the family?

A. I'm the oldest one.

Q. O.K. What did your father do for a living?

A. Ah.....just labor work, in the woods and whatever he could get.

Q. O.K. Can you describe your mothers' typical work day?

A. Oh my God, it would be horrible. Them days no electric lights. Washin' by hand. Makin' bread and all that stuff. You know what I mean?

Q. Yeah.

A. Just a.....

Q. O.K. What was a typical school day like for you?

A. Well.....like any other kid, I suppose. I didn't go to school that long. Grade four, that's all.

Q. O.K. What kinds of things did you have to memorize in school?

A. Well the most of them I.... what I had to do, I'd read 'em, or, would right 'em on my hand or on my wrist and then forget where....where it was.

Q. O.K. How were you disciplined in school?

A. Ah them days. You didn't get away with anything. You know you.....the teacher had a strap or a switch. And they....if you done somethin' they'd line you up. Maybe eight or ten of the boys and a.....she'd start from the first...to try to get the information what she wanted. And she had no a.....Miss Marshall up here, she was aa good teacher. She had a strap made out of a.....drivin'or drivin', the trace off of a drivin' wagon horse.

And, I suppose, it was about foot, foot and a half, two feet long. And it was double sewed. Oh...about that thick, and when she hit you with that, you know, just like hittin'

You with a two by four.

Q. Gerald, are you hot? Don't be nervous.

A. No...No. I believe my sugar is goin' down. I'm a diabetic.

Q. O.K.

A. Pauline, get me somethin' sweet, please. A couple of chocolates, out of the fridge there, will do it.

Q. O.K. If you have to stop for anything, just let me know, O.K.?

(Pauline is Gerald's wife. At this time she gets him his chocolate and he eats it quickly.

Sweat is pouring off his forehead and face.)

O.K. How were you disciplined at home?

A. Well....with a bat side of the head and a kick in the butt, all the same time.

Q. And what were your daily chores at home?

A. Well....I lived with my grandfather and grandmother 'till I was about eight...nine years old. Just up here in the house that a...I was born in.

Q. O.K.

A. And they had a.... a cow and a...oxen and a....hens and stuff like that. So, generally,
That was my chore when I lived up there.

Q. O.K. After your chores were done, what would you do with your free time?

A. Ah...run in the woods, set rabbit snares, go troutin' and all that stuff.

Q. O.K. What was your favorite holiday when you were a child?

A. I think it was in the summer time 'cause.....or Christmas time, you know, what little bit we got.

(At this time in the interview, Mr. Comeau is sweating horribly. I have to turn off the

Camera and wait until the chocolate kicks in. I am very nervous but he assures me

This has happened before, many times)

A. By God, that'll fetch my Mo...MoJo up.

Q. O.K. We can take a break here. Tell you what I'll do. I'll just click this and.....

Pauline: Do you want me to turn the fan there on the floor, on you?

A. The same as....do you ever have hot flashes? Well.....this is the same damn thing.

(laughter)

Q. O.K. What favorite pets do you remember having as a child?

A. Oh....dogs and cats. One time I had a....a.....billy goat. I used to have on a sled and he'd haul yeah, if he didn't butt you down through the woods or somethin' or in the ditch.

But he...he was a good a....a good friend.

Q. What was his name?

A. Billy, we used to call 'im.

Q. Billy, yeah?

A. But we had the bob sleds and everything for 'im and a cart in summertime.

But he was

A contrary thing.

Q. What was it like at your house, when the catalogue arrived? When the Sears Catalogue

Would come?

A. Wish Book. Oh my God. You'd just look at it and wish, you never could buy anything out of it, much. (laughter)

Q. So true. O.K. Where else did you get the things you needed?

A. Ah....what, like groceries?

Q. Well, like your clothes and stuff. Did your mother make them or....?

A. Well....a lot of 'em....a lot of 'em was hand-me-downs and I suppose a lot out of the Eaton Book and Simpson Book.

Q. Right.

A. And stuff like that and...

Q. How much spending money did you have as a child?

A. Huh....I never had very much. All my money went to feed the family.

Q. O.K. What was your religion?

A. Well...I was Catholic and then I cha....went to the Church of England church up here.

Protestant....whatever.

Q. O.K. What were Sundays like in your household, when you were growing up?

A. Well, it'd be the same as....through the week you know.

Q. O.K.

A. Pretty well.

Q. How did you keep up with what was going on in the outside world? How did you get your news?

A. Well, them days, pretty well from the radio and the older people. Like, they'd always listen to the news and stuff like that in the wartime and stuff. We had battery radios, 'cause they was no electricity down this road and that's how you pretty well what was goin' on.

Q. O.K.

O.K. What did you grow and raise yourselves? What did your family grow and raise?

A. Well, always had a vegetable garden, potatoes and.....You grew your own beef and.....and lived with my grandfather and grandmother and hens and stuff like that, you know.

Q. Did you barter for anything? Like, did you trade like your vegetables for somebody's
Cow or something like that?

A. I suppose at that time you would, you know. Like you'd make butter, when the cow
was givin' lots of milk and salted down eggs the same way. You salt your eggs and a...
different things you know.

Q. Salt your eggs. I never heard tell of this Gerald.

A. Oh yeah. I kinna forget now how they did it, if they boil 'em, 'cause I remember used to have big crocks. Them days they was no buckets or anything, Plastic buckets so....
You'd have these great big earthen crocks and that's what you'd salt your meat in, and a...fer winter. And ayour eggs, and your butter, like, you know. Stuff like that.

Q. How did electricity change things?

A. Oh a great deal. You know.....'course we was married four or five years before we
Got electricity, up in the old house. So, we had to lug our water and.....'Course we had
Gravity feed down to the house, in the well. So that helped some. But you...oil lamp and
If you get up in the middle of the night, when you had babies, you had an oil lamp, you know, with the glass globe on it, and then we had a....like a little a....wire....a....wire cage. It went down inside the lamp. So that's how you had, if you didn't have a fire on...
That's how you heated the baby's milk. So when the baby got up in the mornin' they would be some suck from the....the baby. Hid lips would be all sooted and his hands, where he held onto the bottle, but that was the only way, you know, which you get....
Get 'Im fed.

Q. O.K. When did you get running water?

A. Oh, that was a couple of years, after we moved in the house there. And then we dug a well and got a pump, after we got electricity in. Stuff like that. Hot water in the house.

Q. What was bath night like when you were a child?

A. Well, it was a washtub, we used to call it, the big tub you used to wash in. So you heat water on the stove and....and a....you know, jump in the tub. That's about all you had.

Q. O.K. Who was the doctor when you were growing up?

A. Well, they was Dr. Harris, down in Weymouth. And a Dr. Dickie from town and Dr. McCleave. And a...Dr. Lewis, after.

Q. O.K.

A. But they come from house to house fer five or ten dollars and....and half the time they never got it, 'cause everybody was poor. You know but....they was great people.

Q. Who delivered the babies in your community?

A. Well, Dr. Harris, I imagine, and old Dr. Dickie....and a...I suppose Lewis, at the time.
And....

Q. O.K. What were some home remedies that would have been common when you were growing up?

A. Oh my God, don't mention that. That was onions and a...ginger...and molasses. Well if you had a cold, or if you was dyin', one spoonful of that, fetch ya back, 'cause you didn't want to take another one. (laughter)

Q. So you'd mix that them all together?

A. Oh yeah. Cook it on the stove. Cook it all together and that was fer your colds and a...

Camphorated Oil and mustard onto your chest or on your back, into a...flannel blanket,

You know, flannel....

Q. Right.

A. Rag or something like that and....It just smelt good.

Q. O.K. How did you take care of your teeth?

A. Well, I don't think them days, well we brushed some, I guess, when toothbrushes come out, or whatever, but....

Q. And how often would you see a dentist?

A. Well, whenever, you had a toothache. A lot of people haul their own teeth out with pliers.

Q. Yeah.

A. You know, them days.

Q. O.K. So how often did you get to leave Marshalltown?

A. Well, not...not to often, at that time, you know, you want model-A cars and stuff, you know. Probably go to town, if you want to go to Digby. Well, it was five miles away. You'd walk or run, whatever, when you was young.

Q. O.K. What were the roads like?

A. Well, they was quite narrow. I can remember when they paved from Halifax to Yarmouth, like down here. And this here road her, this was always dirt.....road. But this

Was a.....at one time, was a stagecoach road. And just up the road here, on top the hill, the house is tore down now, at first, I think it was a stagecoach stop.

They had a hugh barn where they changed horses. But I can't remember that. But I've heard the old timers.

And then it was a Poor Farm, before they built this one down here. Down, foot the hill lane here.

Q. Yeah.

A. And stuff like that. You know. I remember the barn in the big house. That was a hugh big house. I suppose, you know, they could stay there over night, or a ...and then it turned into like a Poor Farm. Then they built, the one down here, the foot of the lane so...

Q. O.K. Who would look after the roads?

A. The roads?

Q. Who would shovel them and things like that?

A. Well, I can remember it....we'd have so much snow here, we'd be....the only thing
Get through, would be oxen and horses and then when the cars come, like they'd all get together and shovel it out by hand. 'Cause they was no snow plow....well they was a snow plow after a while but only one snow plow fer the whole country.

Q. Right.

A. You know. So a... if you want to get out. I can remember up here in the lane, used to be a fellow named Woody. He just lived up the road a little bit and he was cookin' to the
Base, and that's not really been that long ago, and he got stuck down in there. And he...
Stayed...his car stayed there all winter and they...the fellows in the Poor Farm used to come up and get the mail and the post office was in that same big house I was talkin' about.

Q. Right.

A. And my God, they was walkin' rate over the car and didn't even know it was there.

They was that much snow. I suppose eight, ten feet of snow, in that lane. So they had nothin' to break it out. So his car stayed there 'til spring until they could see

it and went and shoveled it out after a while. But a...we used to have a lot of snow.

Q. O.K. What did you expect to do when you grew up?

A. Well anything I could do to make a dollar.

Q. O.K.

A. Labor. Most of it. Hard labor.

Q. O.K. So as a teenager, what kinds of things did you do for fun?

A. Well...I'm gonna tell ya, I never had to much fun as a teenager. I was all the time workin'. Pretty well. But it was a...you know...After I got on me own, it was a little better.

Q. O.K. Who was your.....who were your movie idols?

A. Well, years ago it was a...Roy Rogers and Tom Mix and a....Gene Autry and you'd

Run around the roads through the week and try to get ten, twelve bottles. I think it was twelve cents then to get to the show. So you get some beer bottles and a....take 'em up

Here to Miss Drew's, to the end of the road here and then you get your twelve, fourteen, fifteen cents, whatever you had and then you'd run to town....to see the show. The old Bijou or....

Q. The Bijou. What was that?

A. A...that was up there where the Dry Cleaners was.

Q. Was that a movie theatre.

A. Yup.

Q. That's what it was called, the Bijou?

A. I think that's what it was. And then the other one down there was called a...Capitol Theatre.

Q. Oh yeah.

O.K. What kind of music do you like? Did you like?

A. Oh...Country and Western...yeah.

Q. O.K. What sport...what kinds of sports did you enjoy?

A. I was never into sports or anything like that. Played a little baseball and stuff. You know a....sting-and-miss, whatever they called it.

Q. What do you remember about dating?

A. Well...sometimes that was quite interesting. But a.....(laughter)

Q. Just the big picture not the little picture.

A. I never had much time for girls, 'til I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old.

Q. O.K. How far did you go in school?

A. Grade four.

Q. And why did you leave school?

A. Well...I had to go to work.

Q. O.K. How old were you when you left school?

A. I was eleven, twelve years old.

Q. O.K. So once you left school, what did you do?

A. Went to work.

Q. O.K. At home? Or you went working out?

A. Oh...anywhere I could get a job. I was up Big Lake. I think I was twelve years old up there driving a pair of horses. And I was four, five miles up the lake and the only way you could get up there, well we had a boat, but a....We used to take the horses through the woods and they was no roads or anything so...this span of horses, you'd take one and

The other one come behind so you....that one there would go down through the woods so you have ta...tie the first one, you had, by the neck and a...go down and get the other one

And then you'd go up the lake. And God I was up there all alone. You know, haulin' logs with the horses, for two years there. I really enjoyed that. Had a nice big house across the lake, they just called it The Dingle. And a...

Q. The who?

A. The Dingle. It's what they called it. And it had a big fireplace into it and hardwood floors. It was beautiful. You know. Lots of deer meat and lots of trout to eat.

Q. O.K. Now I'm getting into your adult like, Gerald.
How did you meet your wife?

A. Well....I guess we was to a dance or something, in on the Cannon Banks. You remember that dance hall, used to be there?

Q. I remember the building. But I don't remember...

A. Yeah.....yeah.....well that used to be a.....They used to have dances there every Saturday night. Place would be full.

Q. So how old were you when you got married?

A. I was twenty, twenty-one, I think.

Q. O.K. O.K. Once you were married, where did you live?

A. Just up the road here, where I was born.

Q. O.K. Alright. O.K. What year....oh no, sorry. What year did you start your first job as an adult?

A. I suppose I was about.....well, I was twelve years old, around eleven, twelve years old. You know...

Q. What was that job?

A. Well in the woods, cuttin' wood and pick-and-shovel, whatever. You know, whatever
You want....

Q. So who were you working for then, Gerald?

A. Well, I used to work for Chester Keen and Horace Fraser there in Bear River and Lloyd MacNeil, up the road here and Lloyd Jefferson and a...anywhere I could get a job.
Harold Simms, in the woods.

Q. O.K. So how did your work change with the seasons? That job.

A. Well, generally, in the winter time, I'd work, like in the woods, after I got fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, and in the summer time, I worked into National Fish. In there, I worked in there for quite a few years.

Q. O.K. How dangerous was your work?

A. Well just...you know it was quite dangerous. Like, twitchin' logs with horses and stuff like that. And cuttin' in the woods...trees and stuff like that. But luckily, you ...you watch what you're doin' you never got hurt....to much. Once in a while somethin' fall on ya...or somethin'....but.

Q. O.K. What was your salary, when you started that job?

A. Well, a dollar a day, two dollars a day. Board yourself, three dollars a day. You know.

Q. How much tax did you have to pay out of that?

A. Well I can't remember payin' no taxes...you know, really, that....

Q. O.K. What do you remember about The Depression?

A. Well....I'm gonna tell ya.....'til I was twenty-five, thirty years old, everything was a depression. Some hand-to-mouth and that's about all.

Q. O.K. What do you remember about war time?

A. I can remember...quite a bit about it. You know, a lot of the boys here goin' over-seas
And stuff like that you know.

Q. Where you ever in the war?

A. No I was to young.

Q. O.K. What effect did the war have on Marshalltown?

A. Well I.... I suppose its...for quite a few years, its about the same as...you know. Everybody was tryin' to scratch out a livin'. 'Cause everybody was about in the same boat.

Q. True.

O.K. How did people help each other out, in days gone by, that's different from now?

Like, do you find that the people were much more willing to come together as a group

And help each other, than what they do today?

A. Well yes, but, I have no problems that way. If I'm doin' anything, there're seven,

Eight of 'em around here, we're all the same, we just jump in and a....Now, last year, I shingled my roof, and start to put the stagin' up and the first thing, they was seven, eight ten fellows here.

Q. That's good though.

A. You know, the roof went on so fast, that a....you'd...and stuff like that you know. Always had good friends around here.

Q. O.K. Gerald, can...what do you remember about the Poor Farm? I know you've already told me a little bit, but....?

A. Well....I can remember quite a bit of it. You know, like the people down there, we used to know and stuff like that. And the caretakers and stuff like that. You know, they...they got pretty well looked after down there, pretty good. They always had their own gardens and...and their own vegetables and their beef and pigs to kill and stuff like that, you know.

Q. Do you think pretty well the people, the inmates, at the Poor Farm, they were treated as well as anybody could have been?

A. A...I would say. 'Cause the most of them fellows went there, lived somewhere else with somebody. It worked fer nothin'. And used like dogs. And when they got sick, or they couldn't look after their self, or do the work, that's where they ended up.

Q. I see.

A. So, you know what I mean, some of them....people, went there, was used. I mean you wouldn't use a dog like some of them was used. I ain't mention no names, but I could. It was terrible. It was terrible. Even in what I remember of 'em, you know?

Q. O.K. So how important were politics, in days gone by, than today?

A. Oh...oh it was worse...worse than 'tis today. My God, today, get to the polls up here and....I don't know every place is like that but see, if you go vote, they give you a pint of rum or...or whatever. And they get drinkin'. And the first thing they'd be into a row rate out in the road, hammer and tong at it. Oh boy, I'm tellin' yeah. Politics and....well, another thing, like politics, there wasn't much work around. So...whatever was in, you'd get a little work on the road, or somethin' like that, you know. And...they pretty well went fer that.

Q. O.K. So, do you think a person, would have got work, depending on how he voted?

A. Oh yeah....yeah, you know. They get a little work on the road, with their horses or oxen or....you know, pick-n-shovel and stuff like that, was a...was a good thing. You know they could a...buy a bag of flour or whatever, different things like that.

Q. O.K. Can you describe...or tell me what Marshalltown looked like when you were growing up? Where there any stores, out here, or anything like that?

A. Yeah....we had a store rate up top the hill here, Ralph Marshall's. That was in Sam Woodman's, would be the next one, they was a gas station, up there on the corner. Just the other side of the over-pass, where the rail-road track...The other side of Jim MacAlpine's, before they put the road down through there. He had a store there and a gas station and a...stuff. He was a nice old fellow. We used to go up there and he'd tell us stories and stuff. Big man. Big man.

Q. How was the law enforced in Marshalltown?

A. Well...them days....they wasn't anything to enforce. You know everybody. They was the odd fellow with a...probably bootleg a little bit or get a deer out of season. But a....nobody paid attention to that. Everybody was....meek and mild in them days. Taint like today.

Q. O.K. When would people get together for a good time, in Marshalltown?

A. Well....'bout the only good times, I remember, in Marshalltown, was rate here on top the hill, every night. In the summer time, they'd be twenty-five, thirty, all gather here on top the hill, and talk and make a bon-fire, if it was cold. Down here on the corner, was another place we all gathered, as young people, you know. Talk.....and stuff.

Q. O.K. Do you remember anything about tourists, coming to Marshalltown, when you were little?

A. Not to.....not too much. The only ones you'd see is....if they went from here to the States or stuff, you know, they come back to visit. Bout all. I can't remember to many tourists bein' around. I suppose in Digby they would be. I guess years and years ago they use to come from Boston in steamers, boats and then come up on the train and, you know, stuff like that, but a...

Q. O.K. How superstitious were people when you were growing up?

A. Quite superstitious.

Q. Can you tell me some of the superstitions? Would you know any that....?

A. Well....they'd tell you about a...ghost and stuff they seen and a...down on the corner. This was suppose to be haunted. And different places around, you know, the old fellows would make the hair come right up on the back of your neck, sometimes. But a....you know, stuff like that.

Q. What is the worst weather you can remember?

A. Oh....well, most of it would be in the summer time or in the winter time, you know, the snow we used to have. We used to be blocked in, stuff like that, you know. But...we didn't mind that. We always got out. God, in other places they get six inches of snow, they're in there for a month. But here, we just get out and shovel it out and keep on goin'.

Q. Yeah. O.K. Do you remember any ghost stories, from your younger years, that you could tell me?

A. Well, not....well, I was hurt a lot but I forget about 'em now. You know...a lot of stories.

Q. O.K. And do you remember any.....do you remember Maud Lewis?

A. Oh yeah. Very well.

Q. Can you tell me anything about Maud. What she looked like or anything like that?

A. Well we....we used ta stop in there as kids. And Everette. Me and Everette used ta hunt a lot back...back the Poor Farm....back in that area. And that old bugger, he'd catch me every time with a gun but I never could catch him with a gun. And he'd look at me and he'd say "Gerry, getting' some meat out of season, are ya." And he'd catch me every time. 'Course I'd be goin' with my head down. See, he probably see me comin' and he'd hide behind the tree or somethin'. Step rate out in front of me. But Everette was a nice old fellow. He'd never tell on ya or anything like that. You know, 'cause he knowed what hard times was.

Q. Right.

A. Set rabbit snares and stuff back in there.

Q. So what about Maud, though, Gerald. I'm really more interested in....?

A. Well, she was a...she was a nice lady. She always, when you went by there, if a...Everette was around, we used to stop in. We'd never go in much if Everette wasn't around, you know, but a....

Q. But they both liked kids, did they not?

A. Oh yeah...yeah. Everette was a...Everette would talk to you for hours and so would she. She used to carry the mail. She go up to the store and get a package of cigarettes or go get the mail. I remember she used ta have a great big old fur coat on, in the winter time. And she'd be comin' down, with the collar rate up around her neck, you know, and stuff. She was awful nice.

Q. I heard a story, yesterday, that Maud had a child. Did you know anything about that?

A. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's down in...see, she's from Yarmouth.

Q. Right.

A. And a...I think it's still livin'. But she called, the way I understand, she called, or somebody called and a...she didn't want nothin' to do with it. But I suppose it's on account of Everette and.....

Q. Right.

A. You know. But them people, what I mean is, they was poor all their life and they tried to survive, you know. Stuff like that.

Q. On last question, Gerald. How would you compare life in general today, to days gone by?

A. The way I compare it?

Q. Umhmmm.

A. Well, it's just about like day and night. Now, I'm retired. I worked for the CN (Canadian National Railroad) for thirty-four years. I get a little pension and stuff. And a...if I don't want to do anything, I don't have to do it.

Q. Yeah.

A. Years ago, you had to get up and work two or three jobs sometimes, to try to make a livin'.

Q. O.K. But the values, that you had as a child, were they better than what the values that children have today?

A. Oh my God, yes. Jesus, why children today, they can't get a new Trans AM, car or somethin', every other day, they don't want anything. You know.

Q. How true.

A. We was lucky to get a jack-knife or, you know, or somethin' like that or a new pair of sneaks....boots. God, today, they want so much.

Q. Do you know how Marshalltown got its name?

A. Well, I think its because, the way I look at it, at the Marshall's. They was quite a few Marshall's up the road. Which is pretty well all gone off, now, you know.

Q. I've heard that many times.

A. Everybody's moved in. Like I call 'em immigrants, as they move in. Move right in on ya, so, they're immigrants.

Q. Yeah.

A. But they're all nice people. All nice people.

Q. Anything else you'd like to say, or....

A. No, not really.

Q. O.K. Well that was good Gerald. Really enjoyed it.