Interviews with May Woodman

William Barraclough: This recording is an interview with Miss May Woodman, a former teacher in the Nanaimo schools of Nanaimo, as living memory for the Nanaimo Historical Society, made this 8th day of August 1966 at her beach cottage at Nanoose Bay.

Miss Woodman, will you kindly tell of the time your family arrived in Nanaimo, and where you first lived.

May Woodman: I was born in Cumberland, England, and my father came to Nanaimo in 18- [long pause] let's see....1887. He came in May, and it was the year of the big explosion, though I'm not sure I got that right date, I don't know the- the big explosion was in...

But anyway, he came to Nanaimo the week after that big explosion on the 3rd of May, and my mother followed in August of the same year with her family.

Barraclough: And you took up residence where?

Woodman: We first lived on Nichol Street. I can't tell you the number of the block that it is now, but I know the street was just a mass of stumps and bush, and we lived on the low side of the street.

Barraclough: And where did you first go to school, Miss Woodman?

Woodman: I started school in the old country, but I remember so little about it. We arrived in August and so in the fall term we started school - there were four of us, four girls school. I suppose we seemed a bit odd to the youngsters here, they called us “The funny English kids”.

Barraclough: [chuckles] Woodman, you went through grade school and entered high school in Nanaimo. Just whereabouts was the high school?

Woodman: The high school that I attended first was an old church. I don't know why we had to go to church to- But anyway. And there was only one teacher in the high school, but the teacher in the girl's school that I had left, a Miss [Abbie?] Gardiner from Victoria, was a wonderful teacher. But the one before her was a bad tempered red haired teacher who, to say the least of it, was unfair!

Barraclough: And, uh, how many students would be in your high school class?

Woodman: Well there was- When I first went, I and one or two other girls where 12 years of age, and there were students there that were almost 20 - 19 or 20 - who were studying for Teacher's Certificates at that time. So the 12 year olds were left very much to their own devices. And, uh-

Barraclough: And how many would there be in the class? For one teacher?

Woodman: Well, I can't tell you how many, but there were so many different grades...
Barraclough: I see.

Woodman: ...that, uh, those just entering high school got very little attention because it wasn't possible.

Barraclough: And, uh, when you- What year did you get your Teacher's Certificate?

Woodman: There was only one teacher in high school and his name was Mr. Hunter - Mr. Walter Hunter - and he was a very good, conscientious teacher. So when the older ones got out, of course the younger ones got more attention, and I got my first teacher's certificate at the age of 16. And of course I knew nothing about teaching.

Barraclough: You didn't have any normal school-

Woodman: There was no normal school in British Columbia at all at that time.

Barraclough: You went right from your diploma to teaching class?

Woodman: We lived on Victoria Road at that time, and on a Saturday morning- I said when I was 16, a farmer came around to the back and found me with a skipping rope. And he said, "I'm looking for a Miss Woodman. A schoolteacher."

"Well," I said, "my name is Woodman, but I know nothing about teaching."

"Well," he said, "I've been asked to come and see you to find out if you'd be willing to substitute out in the North Oyster School."

But I said, "I don't know anything about teaching!"

"Well," he said, "there's nobody else available and if you'll substitute for three months it'll help us quite a bit."

Barraclough: Miss Woodman, after your few months of teaching at North Oyster, then you came to Nanaimo and got a- on the staff of the Nanaimo schools. Which school did you teach in first?

Woodman: My first town school was the old Middle Board that was demolished a few years ago. Miss [Christina?] Pool had resigned in June to marry Dr. G. A. B. Hall and I had the honour of succeeding her, and found myself to be the teacher of 90 boys.

Barraclough: 90 boys.

Woodman: 90!

Barraclough: Oh, just before we forget, where was the first high school that you attended in Nanaimo?
Woodman: Well, at the old church.

Barraclough: Where- Just where was the old church?

Woodman: The old church was on Fitzwilliam Street, almost opposite the present United Church there - St. Andrew's United Church.

Barraclough: Of course that has been-

Woodman: Uh, the high school was almost opposite.

Barraclough: And has been pulled down since then? [then slightly louder] It has been pulled down?

Woodman: Oh yes! Long ago.

Barraclough: Now, have you any other incidents of your- that you'd like to record about teaching?

Woodman: Well you know, to tackle 90 boys is enough to kill anybody...

[Barraclough laughs heartily]

Woodman: ...but I survived, and lived to tell the tale.

The seats were long benches, and the desks were just as long, of course, and if another pupil appeared, just push everybody closer together - never mind whether they had elbow room or not. It was terrific and nobody under the sun could teach 90 boys!

Barraclough: And could we be so bold as to ask what the salary was?

Woodman: Oh! Um, the wonderful sum of $50 a month I got for years! $50 a month! [long pause]

Barraclough: And-

Woodman: I've always thought I was born too soon.

[both chuckle]

Barraclough: And from there on, have you got something else to tell us?

Woodman: Well, uh, I managed there for a little while, but then I was moved over to the, uh, Old Central School. That was torn down too.

Barraclough: Yes.
Woodman: And I think that Mr. John Shaw was my first principal over there.

[long pause]

Barraclough: Uh, have you any anecdotes about the various principals of school of Nanaimo that you'd like to record?

Woodman: Well, we had some remarkable principals. [tape distorts, may have lost tiny amount of recording] ...I won't mention names, but there was another principal who was so suspicious that the rules and regulations weren't being carried out as they should, that he even was looking through the keyhole! [laughs] When the pupils were marching out for recess they bumped him right in the nose!

[Barraclough chuckles]

Oh there have been strange specimens!

Barraclough: And how many years did you teach altogether in Nanaimo?

Woodman: I taught for 43 years.

Barraclough: 43 years.

Woodman: 43! And as I said before, lived to tell the tale.

Barraclough: Miss Woodman, can you recall a few of the students that went on to distinguish themselves after being in your classes?

Woodman: Yes, several of them did. I remember teaching your son, Edward, and now he's doing good work, isn't he? At the biological station?

Barraclough: [chuckles] Yes, that's right!

Woodman: And then there's those Johnson boys, particularly Albert [Albert Johnston?] who's an eye specialist in Vancouver.

Barraclough: Yes.

Woodman: And, oh, Albert Hindmarsh who became a professor in an American University. 11:45
And several of my former students became teachers on the staff of the Nanaimo schools. A lot of them have done very, very well.

Barraclough: Can you recall some of their names?
Woodman: Miss Robertson, who's just retired now was one. Mrs. [Millmoor? Millmore?], who retired a couple of years ago was another. And the two Miss Kenyon's both became teachers.

Barraclough: You taught the two Miss Kenyon's?

Woodman: Mm? I taught the two Miss Kenyon's, yes. Oh, several of them. But among thousands it's hard to pick them out.

Barraclough: Remarkable.

Woodman: There've been so many.

Barraclough: Remarkable.

Woodman: And several of them come to see me quite often and remember me at Christmas time, which is- it gives me a very nice, warm feeling.

Others who became teachers were the Rogers family - oh several of them. Mrs. Hitchen, Mrs. Mills, and Miss Vicky Rogers all became teachers. So did Mrs. [Whitta? Witta?]. Oh and several others, I can't remember them just now.

Barraclough: Did any of the students ever play any pranks on the teachers?

Woodman: [chuckles] Uh, human nature hasn't changed very much, because youngsters in those days liked to play pranks just as well as they do now. And one teacher that I mentioned before was so unpopular with the students that when Guy Fawkes Night came around, they burned him in effigy! There he was, dangling up in the air, just like Guy Fawkes!

Barraclough: [chuckles] Another little story, how about you remembering Commercial Street and what is Terminal Avenue now, when you was a girl?

Woodman: Well, nobody would recognize them who hadn't seen them in the meantime because the long bridge, as they called it then, stretched right across the water, and I remember my sister - my eldest sister who lives in Victoria now - sailing in a dugout canoe. It was borrowed I think without the owner's permission. But she and a friend who became the grandmother of a city doctor in town now, sailed up in this dugout a way up where Terminal Avenue is now.

Barraclough: Well that'd be right under the Bastion Street bridge.

Woodman: Yes.

Barraclough: Exactly. Uh, the big explosion that you mentioned when you arrived first in Nanaimo, Miss Woodman, was on May the 3rd, 1887.
Woodman: Yes.

Barraclough: Uh-

Woodman: Well, when we arrived in August of that year, I was simply fascinated by the number of women who were travelling around with long, crêpe veils down to their heels, and they were the widows of the explosion victims. And there were many of them.

Barraclough: It must have been a sad time.

Woodman: Oh it was a terrible time. Just terrible.

Another thing I remember; the Oscar explosion in 1913. My father was the hoisting engineer over Protection Island at the time, and he noticed the blaze on a steamer that was lying out there, and he went to the phone to advise the harbourmaster what was happening. Just then the powder magazine blew up, the telephone blew out in his face, and there was regular pandemonium.

All the crew of the Oscar had landed by this time and taken to the woods, and never notified the men who were there. So anyway, it was up to them to look after themselves.

17:07

Barraclough: Miss Woodman, after a while you had to write for your normal- or study for your normal certificate. What year would that be?

Woodman: I'm not exactly sure. But the order came from Victoria that if you hadn't taught for at least ten years, you had to take a summer session at normal school. So I'm not positive of the year that I went, but it was in the early 1900's - the first decade of the 1900's - that I attended normal school in Vancouver and got my permanent certificate.

Barraclough: And, uh, do you remember who you stayed with?

Woodman: While there I, with three other Nanaimo students, boarded with Mrs. Thomas [Morrigan?], one of the Randle family pioneers of Nanaimo. Their daughter, Clovis, was very small at the time, but later she became Mrs. Walley who now lives on Hammond Bay Road.

Barraclough: Correct. Now, this cottage of yours, Miss Woodman - to close this interview -on Nanoose Bay. What a beautiful place it is, you must have enjoyed living here for some years in the summertime.

Woodman: All my life I wanted a little cottage by the sea, and so the year 1930 I had this place built and every summer since then I have lived here for several weeks. And this particular year, this is my third month down here...

Barraclough: Yes.
Woodman: ...and it's a beautiful place for anyone to end the days.

Barraclough: And you had some neighbours, too, that are well known?

Woodman: Uh...my friends, old friends of long ago, the Miss Haarer's who both taught in Nanaimo for so many years, liked it so well down here that they had a little cottage. So, for over 30 years we've been neighbours down here.

Barraclough: Isn't that nice. And it was Pauline-

Woodman: And I still enjoy it very much.

Barraclough: There was Pauline and Isabel-

Woodman: Pauline and Isabel Haarer have been my neighbours.

20:16

Barraclough: Thank you, Miss Woodman, it has been a pleasure to make this recorded interview. What a treasure it will be in future years for historically minded teachers and pupils of Nanaimo schools to hear.

This is William Barraclough speaking, of the Nanaimo Historical Society.

[tape recorded clicking]

This is November the 9th, 1972. We are having a social afternoon at the home of Mrs. Andrew [Montador?] on Nanoose Bay. Miss May Woodman is here and we have just replayed the tape recording Miss Woodman made August the 8th, 1966, at her cottage close by Mrs. Montador's. She was then the age of 88 years.

We have asked Miss Woodman if she will kindly add a few items to this tape recording.

Woodman: I am now the ripe age of 94, and I'm still living on Nanoose Bay. At present I'm enjoying the hospitality of my neighbour Mrs. Montador, who has been here as long as I have. And...I don't know...I don't seem to unwind somehow.

Mr. and Mrs. Barraclough are here now and I'm supposed to give them a few items about my past. Mrs. Barraclough I taught at one time, in the days of long ago. How many years ago I wonder; I wouldn't know.

[indistinct muttering from someone off-microphone]

And I have, in the meantime, become a great-great-aunt. I don't know how many greats, perhaps I should put one more, I don't know. But anyway I, um, I visited at their home in Victoria just a couple of weeks ago and I thought how wonderful it was to notice the difference in youngsters now. This child will be two years old next week. Two years old! And I am 94! So I'm getting ready to depart while she's
getting ready to take my place. And by the looks of her, and the actions of her, I think she'll be heard from.

Barraclough: Well, thank you very much, Miss Woodman for this added interview. I see Mrs. Montador has the teacups here and I'm sure we're all going to enjoy that.

24:32
[long pause and end of tape]