

**Glenbow Archives, Elbow Park Oral History Project, RCT-982-12**  
**Helen Firmstone**  
**May 6, 1999**

Former Elbow Park Address: Riverdale Avenue, 30<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

Date of Birth: February 24, 1917

Place of Birth: Calgary, Alberta

Schools attended in Calgary: Elbow Park Elementary, Rideau Junior High, Western Canada High

Occupations(s): Owner–operator, Tally–Ho Tours

Date of Marriage: September 9, 1939

Spouse Name: Garrington M. Firmstone

Spouse Occupation(s): Oil company

Number of Children: 3

Father’s Name: Harry Pollard

Mother’s Maiden Name: Tillen

Father’s Occupation(s): News photographer

Mother’s Occupation(s): Homemaker

Paternal Grandfather’s Name: Pollard

Paternal Grandmother’s Maiden Name: Williams

Maternal Grandfather’s Name: Tillen

Maternal Grandmother’s Maiden Name: Snowdon

Approximate time period you lived in the neighbourhood (if applicable): 70 years

Approximate time period your parents lived in the neighbourhood (if applicable): 30 years

Approximate time period your grandparents lived in the neighbourhood (if applicable): na

Helen Firmstone has a very interesting background. Her father was Harry Pollard, one of Calgary’s most renowned early photographers. A native of Tillsonburg, Ontario, Pollard came west in 1898 and established himself quickly in his field. He later worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway and travelled the world several times to document Canadian Pacific’s tourist operations. His massive photo collection now resides at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. Pollard’s first residence on Riverdale Avenue later became the Strathcona School for Boys. Helen’s mother was also from Ontario, and was crowned Miss Canada in 1908. She had come west to live with a great–aunt who wanted some companionship. After growing up in Elbow Park and attending school there, Helen married a neighbourhood boy, Gary Firmstone, whose father was a regular army officer with the Lord Strathcona Regiment. After a brief stint in Vancouver and several years in Mount Royal, the Firmstones moved back to Elbow Park in 1955, building a new house in the western part of the neighbourhood. Helen contrasts the old and new parts of the neighbourhood in her interview: one very interesting observation she makes concerns the influx of Americans to the district in the fifties. She also talks about some of her childhood activities in the neighbourhood, especially horseback riding, and her memories of friends and neighbours. As well as raising her own family, Helen later became a tour business operator. Helen’s daughter Joy joins the interview on tape two.

## **INDEX**

### **Two Tapes**

#### **Tape One, Side One**

- 001 – Introduction.
- 003 – Date of birth: February 1917, in Calgary, at family home on Riverdale Avenue. Identical twin.
- 019 – Christened at home by Dean Paget.
- 029 – Father was Harry Pollard, news photographer, mother was Eleanor Tillen. Parents from Ontario.
- 037 – Grandfather Pollard was also a photographer. Father came west in 1898.
- 044 – Mother came out to visit a great-aunt who lived in Calgary, who asked her to stay. Educated at Sacred Heart convent.
- 056 – Mother participated in Stampede parade as Miss Canada.
- 061 – Parents were married in approximately 1910. Had three other siblings.
- 069 – Father a prominent photographer: his Indian portraits.
- 088 – Connection to the CPR and Associated Screen: travelled the world.
- 100 – Family also travelled extensively, especially by train; free passes.
- 116 – Father was the first private individual to drive from Lake Louise to Golden.
- 122 – Growing up with parent as a minor celebrity.
- 134 – Family moved on Riverdale into smaller house, then later to 30<sup>th</sup> Avenue.
- 145 – The first house on Riverdale. Father probably lost the house due to financial difficulties during World War One.
- 162 – CPR employment quite lucrative for father, comfortable existence for family..
- 167 – The second Riverdale house.
- 176 – Move to 30<sup>th</sup> Avenue was probably for a nicer house.
- 181 – Purchase of Storm Mountain Lodge in Banff National Park. Met a wide variety of people, including some celebrities.
- 219 – Father’s photographic career exciting: ascent of Mt. Robson in the Rockies.
- 228 – Later had a studio after retiring from the CPR.
- 234 – Elbow Park Elementary. Started at cottage school. Some teachers.
- 252 – Crossing Elbow River on the ice. Near drowning experience.
- 266 – Keeping horses in Elbow Park: tethered in front of houses.
- 274 – The neighbourhood Stampede, organised by local kids.
- 298 – Riding in the area. Story of brother’s makeshift barn.
- 316 – Riverdale residents felt somewhat separate from Elbow Park.
- 323 – Her childhood friends and their families.
- 355 – Neighbours continued.
- 370 – Childhood activities.
- 382 – Parents’ relationships with neighbours.

- 392 – Attending Rideau Junior High.
- 410 – The family home on 30<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Close to Woods Park.
- 426 – Parents’ moved again out of Elbow Park as children left home.
- 444 – 30<sup>th</sup> Avenue neighbours.
- 454 – Walking to school and elsewhere.
- 478 – Mother drove and had her own car: quite unusual in those days.
- 492 – Character of Elbow Park
- 504 – End of side.

### **Tape One, Side Two**

- 010 – Start. Character of Elbow Park continued.
- 016 – Elbow Park was a more prosperous area of Calgary.
- 020 – The Depression and its effect on Elbow Park. Transients and giving food.
- 048 – Glencoe Club: father never joined, charter member of the Country Club.
- 064 – Christ Church: attended regularly. Rectors: Canon Horne.
- 085 – The community club and rinks.
- 093 – Attending Western Canada High: Western vs. Central.
- 107 – Many of her contemporaries died in war.
- 114 – Many families had a child in the military.
- 123 – War casualties: the Pentland boys.
- 144 – Other effects of the war in Elbow Park.
- 168 – Teachers at Western.
- 179 – Marriage: meeting husband, Elbow Park lad, Gary Firmstone.
- 194 – First date with Gary.
- 203 – Husband’s war time activities and subsequent career.
- 214 – Husband’s father regular officer with Lord Strathcona regiment.
- 240 – The post-war boom.
- 258 – Return to Calgary: move into Mount Royal. Shifted to Elbow Park for the family atmosphere.
- 270 – Built house in west Elbow Park around 1955. Area had been empty.
- 285 – Her neighbours in the new area and their occupations.
- 326 – American presence in the area: many in oil industry. Very social.
- 362 – Skiing in the Rockies before World War Two.
- 392 – Occupations of neighbours.
- 424 – Her husband went into oil industry, joined Imperial Oil.
- 459 – End of tape.

### **Tape Two, Side One**

- 001 – Start. Sgt. Kendall: member of mounted constabulary patrolling Riverdale Avenue. [daughter participating in interview].

024 – The milk wagon and other horse drawn delivery.  
034 – 4<sup>th</sup> Street the shopping district for Elbow Park.  
039 – Ruttles stable on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue.  
048 – Archdeacon Swanson.  
069 – Keeping in touch with old Elbow Park friends: many returned to the neighbourhood.  
082 – Her siblings and their lives.  
096 – Brothers' oil well in Turner Valley.  
118 – Travel guide written by brothers.  
131 – One brother, Harry, returned to Elbow Park and lived by the school.  
148 – Elbow Park remained a family neighbourhood when she was raising her children.  
168 – The separation of western, newer part of district from older section.  
187 – Schools her children attended.  
202 – Walks from Riverdale over to Macleod Trail.  
210 – Story of spanking for horseback ride.  
238 – Some other personalities of Elbow Park: Woodall family.  
267 – End of interview.