

Oral History Interview with Mr. John A Britten
Conducted by Angela Baker, July 13 1993
Transcription by Armin Shujaatullah, February 18, 2000

AB Could you start by stating your full name for me please?

JB John A Britten.

AB Great, and where did you originate?

JB Halifax.

AB And what was your date of birth?

JB March the 17, sorry March the 25th 1917.

AB Okay. So you attended Saint Mary's high school, did you?

JB The high school [departments], yes.

AB What years was that?

JB September 31 to 34.

AB M-hmm.

JB Three, total three years.

AB I see. So what was the school like when you were there? It was under the Irish Christian Brothers?

JB Irish yes. Irish Christian Brothers.

AB What were the, what were the classes like?

JB I n what way now?

AB What did you have to take and what was...

JB Well I was just in the high school department and we took Latin, just about everything that was going that time.

AB Latin...and was the workload difficult or heavy?

JB Not too bad I guess, yeah, not too bad. I was two years in grade ten but that was my own fault, it wasn't the, I just wasn't attentive enough I guess. Put enough time for my studies.

AB What were the Irish Christian Brothers like as educators?

JB Oh, very good. We found them good.

AB Were they strict? What was their discipline?

JB Oh, fairly strict, yes they were. Yeah fairly strict. I got along good with them though. I didn't have any problems.

AB What were the rules of school—behavior?

JB Well I guess normal rules. I guess I don't know anything out of the ordinary.

AB Well it's probably a lot different than today.

JB I [would think] yeah there was no problems then like there is today in the schools, no. Everything went smooth.

AB Yeah, you can't remember any times that a difficulty arose or...?

JB With me, or with the...?

AB Or that you remember.

JB No I don't remember any time, no. Nope.

AB What were the recreational activities that went on at the school?

JB Oh they had a hockey rink there. And they had hockey in the winter time. And they had a handball court which, well even today there's not too many of them around. They had a [hold] on the campus there, they had a big hand ball court. It was like—have you heard of the game?

AB Yeah.

JB [Hard using] a rubber ball and you hit it up against the wall, and so on [score]. Then they had football and a bit of baseball. Yeah and I guess that was about it.

AB Yeah.

JB Yeah. They'd had their track and field about once every year in the good weather.

AB Let me see. So about your fellow students, how about how many students were at Saint Mary's? It was a college and a high school at the time right?

JB Yeah. College and a high school. Now that's, there would be, oh well, you know. Can you turn that off a minute, or would...

AB Sure

Tape stops.

AB So a couple of hundred and what were their, what were their family backgrounds and generally, your fellow students?

JB Family background? Well, I guess what you're grabbing at is, I was—better turn that off.

Tape stops.

JB Well you had to pay tuition fees at Saint Mary's. At that time of course the other schools, there was no tuition fees. And I was there on a scholarship. Three year scholarship and I was from a poor family, but the other people, they always gave me the impression that their parents were well to do. Well if [they say] my father wasn't working he was unemployed, but the other people you know their parents were at least working.

AB That was at the time of the depression?

JB Yes, that's right, 1931 [like Mister Charlotte].

AB Were there many scholarships offered?

JB There's two from Alexander [Mckay], that was the school I went to, the the common school. There was two from there, and now the others I don't know, no. There would be some others too, yeah.

AB I see, so you had to compete for those scholarships? Were they given out on marks?

JB Yeah, pretty well on marks, but the, I won a watch in common school presented by Father McQuillan and the, I think it came from our parish, the scholar ship. I think they were kinda thinking I was gonna be a priest.

AB Oh I see.

JB I think that's what was behind it. Course I did well in school. I won the watch this year grade eight, before I went to Saint Mary's.

AB I see so let me see, was the school completely Catholic when you were there?

JB I would say pretty much so but there was some other denominations sprinkled in there, yeah.

AB Yeah, yeah.

JB Yeah.

AB And what role did religion play in you daily high school?

JB Oh there was a chapel there. They had a chapel and we'd spend a certain amount of time in the chapel each day, if I remember correctly. It just be probably for prayers you know, something like that yeah. And of course they had boarders there, you know there were some people that that lived at the college. You know where it was located?

AB Windsor street?

JB Windsor and Quinpool Road yeah. It took in where the [retention] home is now, right down to Quinpool Road. They took in a big area.

AB Yeah.

JB Yeah.

AB So would you have any type of prayers like during the day? In beginning of class or that kind of thing.

JB I'm not sure of that. I kind of think that prayers might have been in the chapel.

AB Yeah.

JB Yeah each morning, well I, I couldn't be too sure of that it's quite a while ago.

AB Okay what else do we have here. Were there any type of school societies or organizations at the time?

JB No. I don't think so except the college ones. They had their organizations but not the high school department.

AB Not the high school?

JB No.

AB Let me see. So you said there were some students who lived in residence. What were the geographic origins of the students? Were most of them from Halifax or [did they]?

JB No there was, I can remember a couple from West Indies, now they would be living in you know and some from Cape Breton and some from Prince Edward Island. Yeah, they would be living in. And probably some from the general Maritime area. Matter of fact, I think we had one in our grade from Newfoundland. So these people, you know. The college had quite a reputation.

AB Yes

JB Being a good, good place for education.

AB I see so you went there for grade nine.

JB Nine and ten, those two years in ten. Things were tough at home and I wasn't, I didn't, I wanted to get out and work.

AB Yeah.

JB So after I [graded] the second year at ten, I went to Saint Pats High School for a short time grade eleven, but then I dropped out of school and got a job.

AB Let me see. Do you have any memorable experiences that stand out in your mind when you look back at your years at Saint Mary's?

JB No.

AB Or any personalities, the Brothers or anyone that you remember in particular?

JB Well I remember Brother Ross. He was a great fellow for telling jokes.

AB Oh really?

JB He'd be laughing at his own jokes and before he was half way through he'd be just, you might say rolling with with the yeah. And some of them were from Newfoundland and some of them were from the States, you know, the Brothers. And then they had some lay teachers too.

AB Oh really?

JB Professors, yeah, yeah. Brother Cornelius was the head one at the time

AB Well I think that's about all I wanted to cover.

JB Oh good.

AB Good thanks

JB Didn't take long.

AB Unless you can think of anything you'd like to add?

JB No. There's a lot of them gone now of course. That's part of the course isn't it?

AB Yeah, I guess so.

JB Yeah. How do'ya like Saint Mary's?

AB Oh I loved it.

JB Yeah?

AB It...

Tape stops – end of interview