

Catherine Daigneault

Translates and transcribed by Vye Bouvier

PART I — CHILDHOOD

I was born in a community called Little Canoe Lake, four miles from, Canoe Lake (Canoe Narrows). My father's name was Basil Iron; my mother's name was Marie. I don't know her maiden name — she died when I was almost two years old.

I was adopted by, two elderly people, Jerome and Marie Adele Couillineur. They adopted two other children, their grandson Joseph Couillineur and my aunt Sarah Iron. My Aunt Sarah raised me. We called Jerome and Marie Adele our grandparents. Jerome Couillineur was a councilor for our Indian band. My natural father's brother, Jean Iron was the chief of the band.

Little Canoe Lake was a small community of four houses. We lived and worked closely with all three houses, but our house was closest to Pierre Durocher's family. Their son, Clement, was the same age and was my friend. Clement died in childhood in an accident.

We provided for ourselves by growing gardens. Joseph and I weren't very big when we got lessons in tending gardens. We thought we were badly treated when all along we were getting a valuable skill. We would break the earth with spades, and expand the garden each year.

When our work in the garden was completed, we would pack to go on a hunt. Pierre Durocher's family travelled with us. Some days we would walk as far as seven miles in search of game. In those days (*kayas*), when I was growing up, we lived from what the land could provide, that is *naheyow mtciwin*, or "the food of the Cree". We moved around, all over looking for game. In the summers, we'd return to our community occasionally, to look after our gardens.

In the fall, after freeze-up, we'd leave for our winter hunt. Our hunts sometimes took us 20 miles from our community. We had one team of dogs. My grandfather, Jerome, would load our food, blankets and our clothes into the toboggan and we would walk. The snow was deep. My grandfather would cut willows (*nipisiya*) to make us snowshoes. The Cree word for snowshoes is *mahkwachumusak.or usamak*. There were no trails; the dog team and men in the lead would break trail. It was a hard life in those days. When it was time to camp, the men would shovel snow, make a large fire and wait for the women and children to arrive. The women and children would set *up* camp, while the men went out to hunt. A meal would be prepared. The men would return in a short time, with one or two moose in one day. The moose population was high in those days.

The moose or deer meat that the men brought back would be cut up and smoked to preserve it. The "dry meat", as it was called, would then be wrapped in the skin of a deer or moose (*atamske*) and hung outside, ready to be loaded

when the hunt moved on.

Our winter walks were, at times, cold. We had a treaty blanket (*uskociewakoop*) to wrap around our-selves. We had no coat or sweaters. The men wore coats called "three winters" (*nistoopipones*). We wore moosehide moccasins which were wrapped in rabbit skins. Our feet were warm. For blankets, we used rabbit fur robes and "treaty blankets". The shelters in our camps were *mitekewap* built out of moss and poles.

On Sundays, on the hunt, we prayed, sang and had a feast in our shelter. The main dish at the feast was moose nose and tongue. The congregation would take turns guarding the food in other tents from the dogs.

On Christmas, we would go to Canoe Lake for the Catholic midnight mass. During Christmas, we would eat more bannock than the usual ration. There wasn't much flour to be had in those days, and bannock (*pahkwesikan*) was a treat.

We had a fireplace of clay, on which my grand-mother made fried bannock. A kettle hung from the fireplace. Our staples were meat and fish.

We would return to our community from the hunt, for Catholic Church events and Treaty Days. On Treaty Days we would receive a small amount of food, gunpowder shot (*kasketew*) and fine string and twine for the making of nets. The food was usually for only one day and usually we

would get bacon.

The children would gather wood. In the summer, I would carry a bundle of wood on my back. Joseph and I weren't allowed to play very often, even when other children would come over. My Aunt Sarah and I would fish together on autumn nights. We'd store our whitefish for the winter in a shelter made for the purpose. We would hang fish from the tail, ten to one pole. Winter fishing was carried out without the use of a "jigger"; we would use poles to extend our net under the ice.

My grandparents worked hard to provide for us. Jerome and Pierre were good hunters. We never had to worry about food.

The games I played as a child were a ball game and skipping rope. You stood in a circle for the ball game and tried to hit someone in the centre. The ball was made of moosehide. For enjoyment, we learned to play the accordion and mouth organ from our grandfather. In the summer, we would swim in Canoe Lake.

One of the memories of my childhood is a canoe trip with my grandfather to a church celebration in Ile-a-la-Crosse. The gulls were flying overhead and I wanted my grandfather to get me one. He shot one. When our canoe was alongside the gull, it pecked at me when I reached for it. I was frightened and bawled. I remember another trip to Ile-a-la-Crosse during a flood. I was too little to paddle and would lie on the floor of the canoe to watch ducks fly from

the reeds along Canoe River. During the flood, Ile-a-la-Crosse was split into three islands. People used canoes to go back and forth. We had a relative, Isabelle, who lived here then. Her husband, Alexandre, ran a "stopping place" in Ile-a-la-Crosse. Boards were layed out to form bridges. We tied our canoes at doorways. I remember when the north wind (*kewetin*) blew, waves would splash into the church.

I worked as a man when I was growing up and even after I got married. I gathered and chopped wood, fished, I worked outside. Sarah worked inside cooking and sewing.

There weren't many children in our small community. Many children died early. Today, just Joseph and I are alive from Little Canoe Lake."

This taping was done in 1974. Catherine died in December. 1982

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