

(10)

✓

HERSTORY PROJECT

Mrs. Peltier interviewed by Helen Lovekin

- A t i k o k a n .

- Q. What year were you born?
- A. 1896.
- Q. How long have you lived here in Atikokan?
- A. Since 1923.
- Q. When did you move up to Northern Ontario?
- A. In 1923. We went to Keshabow and there were 13 houses at that time including the school, the Post Office the store, everything.
- Q. What brought you into Northern Ontario?
- A. Work - we couldn't be were we had no work. You see we were close to Winnipeg and it was the time of the Depression and a man that comes from Montreal and goes and settles in Saskatchewan with crop failure year after year will sell it.
- Q. Did he work on the railway?
- A. Yes, there is where he started when we moved close to Winnipeg, he was laid off in the fall because he was a new employee. All winter long we had nothing to eat - just what I could squeeze so hard in the summer time, we just barely lived.
- Q. So you grew things in a garden?
- A. Of course, we had to, we had to do something. All the berries we could get at least for at Christmas time - that was the least we had to have. With time and application, each time there was an opening at some place on the CN, he kept applying until he got the job at Kashabow.
- Q. How did you feel about leaving Montreal?
- A. I didn't live in Montreal, my husband was from Montreal. I think it must have been a hard time for him too.
- Q. Are you from Quebec or...?
- A. No, I am from Manitoba.
- Q. How did you feel about the change?
- A. I was glad as long as I got something to eat and feed my children with. There was not much of a future but at least we knew we would have something to eat all year round. When a man worked from April to October and then he is laid

off and not a dollar is coming in. "No matter how careful you are you have to have a few clothes for the children, you have got to get a pair of shoes now and then - it was no life. I would have gone anywhere, anyplace as long as we were earning our daily bread and I didn't believe in going "on the town" and I was too proud to go and ask for help like that, so it was rough. For the sake of being independant, I was willing to go anywhere. There was nothing I wouldn't do to better myself."

Q. When you came to Kashabowie you said there were 13 buildings - how many children did you have with you at that time?

A. Three, I went over there with a three week old baby. The other two were tugging at my skirt, and a bag of diapers and a few cookies for them because I had 12 hours of train ride. I never forget when I arrive over there my heart went down so low.

Q. Why?

A. ^{um...} ^{Men,} (Mainly because) they don't trust us too much sometimes. He told me about a nice, white little cottage that I was going to go to, well, I was so happy and I looked forward to that white cottage. It was on a hill alright, but it was an old cutter's shack only partly whitewashed.

Q. When your husband was working in Kashabowie what sort of things did you do?

A. Entertainment, you mean?

Q. Yes.

A. We stayed there four years and the only thing that we could do was at Christmas time when they had some kind of Christmas Concert by the children who were going to school, in fact Jean was one of the pupils, she did her first year. Outside of that, they were all Finlanders and there were maybe two or three families that weren't - two Francais and the others must have been English. I'm telling you it was lonely and they would invite us those Finnish women, and they were very nice and very entertaining with their baking, very generous. But they all speak their language and us, we were just sitting there like a bump on a log. Actually it was boring for us but for the sake of seeing somebody - you get to a point in places like that - I guess you go backwards instead of forwards. You think more of your problems than of something brighter.

Q. When you were with these women, and although it was boring because they didn't speak any English, was it more for the sake of being with the company of women?

- A. Yes, it was for company's sake. Even if it was boring, it was still something. You were getting dressed, you took time to get dressed, put on the best dress you owned, fix your hair, you made your girls as pretty as little dolls and it was something to do apart from cooking the cheapest way and scrubbing those bare floors and carrying water, like I did by the pailful. Pail after pail up the hill. It was a change that was really helpful although it was boring to sit there and not know what was being talked about. Then everybody knitted in their own way - the Finlanders don't hold the needles like we do and do they ever go fast and the beautiful knitting. They were wonderful women and wonderful workers with the exception of the language problem.
- Q. Did you have more children while you stayed at Kashabowie?
- A. Yes, I had two more and each time I moved back home to have them.
- Q. You never had them in a hospital?
- A. Never.
- Q. Who helped you with the children? Who helped you as a midwife?
- A. A neighbor - there was always an old neighbor, somebody older than I was. Everybody did it, I helped you today and tomorrow you helped me. I did it myself too after I was older. Not for money, at no time did we take money. And then the entertainment - I've seen at times if somebody who could sing came, it was a singing party.
- Q. Why did you come to Atikokan?
- A. For a better living again. From Kashabowie, of course my husband kept bidding for the section foreman's job and then we went to _____ for one year but he couldn't handle the work so we got transferred to Emo. I wanted school by that time for the children.
- Q. They were old enough to go to school?
- A. We had two of school age and then I wanted school because I didn't have all the schooling I would have liked to have and I didn't want my children to be in the same boat. So we went to Emo and we stayed there 28 years so the children all got their education there and of course in Fort Frances soon as they went into other courses. I came here after my husband retired, you have 8 children and small checks all the time, in fact I always tried to earn money myself outside to make up. All he had was a \$40 pension per month and we couldn't pay taxes, we couldn't pay fuel, we couldn't pay hydro, we couldn't eat/and the work over there was not good enough for me.

- 4
- Q. What were these jobs? Cooking in camps?
- A. No, in the hospital. Anyway I decided we should come here and I'll get a house and I'll keep borders because of the mines - this was 22 years ago and the mines were still in full swing. That is what I did, I came here, and I bought a house for 9 thousand dollars and I had almost 2 thousand dollars of furniture because I had to have a large freezer and leaving a place where I had no electric appliances, I came here and I needed those things. In seven years, I was clear - I didn't owe a dollar to nobody.
- Q. For both towns, Emo and Atikokan, when you moved to Emo, was it already an established town?
- A. Yes, but it was small, about 700 I think.
- Q. Not, like Kashabowie.
- A. No, at least there was a four room public school and there was a two room high school and there were three churches. There was a better future for my children and I wanted my children to have better than what I had.
- Q. In again, Atikokan, what was it like 22 years ago?
- A. Not too many sidewalks.
- Q. Was it like a hole punched in the bush?
- A. Not, really, it was better than Emo. Better grocery stores, better schools but then I didn't need those things then because my children were all gone, in fact, my twins had just finished their courses. So I was really for myself. I had three grandsons that were that age besides my own. Then they were teenagers so they were not small as to tie me down, so I was free to work.
- Q. You are very strong about the idea of improving your life for your children, from the interview from Mrs. Webber she has mentioned that you are deeply involved with the Catholic Church? Was that a religious conviction, a personal conviction to work for your children?
- A. My parents were Catholics and I was brought up a Catholic. But there was always something - I don't know - not that I think it is the wrong religion, but some of their rules to me were man-made rules which I didn't agree with. I'll take from the Bible, I'll accept it but from another man, it's like I read from some of today's books. Sure it is a beautiful story but it is still a man's story. There was a Catholic church over there but they had a priest only sometimes and then small group of people like that who are poor, no matter how honest you are, you are always the little one. There were always the ones better off who we had to look up to and I resented that very much. Myself, I believe in equal rights.

- Q. Do you believe equal rights for not only classes but from the standpoint of men and women?
- A. Yes, and no. I like to be independant from men, I'll admit - I don't like men to boss me around. They're not going to tell me what to do - I know what I have to do and I'll do it. And if I know I can't do something, I'll say I can't do it or I don't care to do it. I don't like to be pushed around. I think I am a queer woman sometimes, but...I have been fortunate and I am at this time, one of the most fortunate senior women that is living I am sure.
- Q. Why? How do you see yourself fortunate?
- A. I look at all of the wonderful things there are in this world. I have the nicest friends and it is not because they are poor women like me - as far as money is concerned they are far better off than I am. They have the education that I don't have. I never learned English at school myself.
- Q. Did you find it a problem when you moved to Manitoba, not speaking English?
- A. I was born in Manitoba and I was raised on a bush farm. Of course, us kids enjoyed it but I don't think my mother liked it too much. In those days money was as scarce as it has been for us now and then. We were fortunate that my mother was a school teacher, so she taught school there. Not through the government like they do today, she did it for the sake of the children and she liked to help out. That is how come we got out French but we didn't have English - she knew English but those Frenchmen - you had to be so French and it is drilled into us to be French and we are. When I left home to go and work I found it difficult and I was lonesome and I was amongst English-speaking people, but I was determined to work and to make my living.
- Q. Did you encounter discrimination in your wages or in your positions because you were a woman?
- A. I don't think so.
- Q. For instance, the differences in paychecks?
- A. Oh, yes.
- Q. Was it a great deal or was it just a little bit?
- A. It was not that much - of course with the work I was doing, I was not a professional and I was just cooking. Maybe us women get away with more than a man does.
- Q. What do we get away with?
- A. Let's say a crew of men that you are cooking for will expect more from the man than they would expect from the woman.

In time they might cater to us and to take too, to what the cook will say.

Q. That is important in a bush camp.

A. It was not in a bush camp, I never cooked in a bush camp, just in the hospital and the railroad.

Q. How did you feel after putting so much of this tremendous energy into giving the children the best that you could possibly give? After they grew up, how did you feel when they were gone?

A. I was happy. They turned out to be good women, every one of them. They are all living, I got my eight girls and they are all living, and they all finished something and they are all able to keep themselves above board and better off than I ever was. I am alright now, I have got plenty to eat and I don't have to worry, I don't have a palace but I like it - I like old things, I am old and I like old things. I am happy with my girls, they are all good to me.

Q. So, your family hasn't left you, they are still around.

A. Oh, yes, they are all here and generous and so are my son-in-laws..

Q. So it was an accomplishment to you?

A. Yes.

Q. And you found all the effort was worth it?

A. Yes, I'm repaid for it.

Q. It must be very gratifying.

A. Yes, of course there is religion involved too. I guess I preach sometimes too because some of my girls are very close to religion too, some are not so close and their husbands too. But they are all good men, that is One thing I am thankful for. When I hear somebody say something about mother-in-laws, I don't like that. I have no difficulties with my son-in-laws - why do others have difficulty? I don't know. What more do I want in life? Right now I couldn't ask for any better - I don't live in luxury but I like it. I keep my house as clean as I can and of course I am busy.

Q. Do you feel that when you had this large family, did you feel like a pioneer?

A. No. I tried to get to the top, that is all.

Q. And this was a place to do it?

A. Really what I had in mind was the future of my girls and I wanted them to have better than what I had, at any cost. I wouldn't back up on no work, no time, no sacrifices. I would have done without shoes or stockings, or any-

thing to let them have it so they could go on.

Q. It is nice that all of your girls grew up well and they still come and see you and you are very happy with them. You mentioned about being French and how you loved being French.

A. So what I go for that I believe in is to learn to speak it well, use the proper words and your proper grammar.

Q. So you don't like the Quebecois ~~dialect~~?

A. Not too much. When we were small a funny thing happened. There were some Quebecois but the kids were always tormenting us because we were French Belgian, you see, my father was from Belgium. They kept hounding us and calling us "The Belgians" or something like that and at one point we went to Mama and asked her why they kept calling us that name. We were proud to be French Belgians you know. You see, my father's parents were from France and they had to imigrate to Belgium after or I think before my father's time. My mother just said "Call them Green Canadians" and of course we went out like a shot and if after they said anything about our being French Belgian, - I don't know why we resented being called that because that is what we were - of course we called them Green Canadians.

Q. Did you find that this pride was a spiritual need in you?

A. No, I think it is more the French feeling - and old country French - and that is home and country. You die for your country - you lay down your life for your country first of all - and I think that is what it was. Although my mother was a Canadian born and my father was old country French and their mother was from the U.S.. My mother never really talked that way to us, but of course we had old country French people too and then our relatives were all older than my father was and without hesitation you lay down your life for your country and your flag was ..that's it.

Q. Did you find any of these feelings lacking because you lived in these small communities in Northern Ontario?

A. You mean lacking in me or in other people?

Q. From your surroundings.

A. Yes. Nobody has the same interests. Maybe they would if they were in another country. I don't think people really talk about it or are interested the same as we were. Because most of the people of my father's generation were from the old country and that is what makes the difference and maybe

if I were in another country myself it would make a difference. ^ And that is the only kind of wood she had in the winter time and she had only a cook stove. She had to keep on making fire all night long in order not to be cold because the little boy was not very old and the little girl either. So my kids found out on the way to school that they stopped so we went to see her and she told us she had been up all night making the fire. I told her to come over and they stayed with us until I don't know what happened. Until she had something else to help her but the wages were all the men could get at that time - was five dollars a month on the highway.

Q. Do you wish there had been more co-operation between the women in these communities or do you think there was a great deal of co-operation?

A. I think the co-operation was as good as it could be, considering the conditions. If you have no work, what can you do? If you don't earn any money - I know, I went through that after the First World War - you just can't do nothing. What can you do? You are raising children, poor little babies and you give them all you can and you are just barley living yourself. I could tell you a true story. When I just had Jean and Madelaine - that spring was before my husband went to Kashobowie, he was out of work all winter long. As careful as I was to try to have something to eat, and all we had was bread and porridge and brown sugar. And then came springtime so my husband left to go to Kashabowie for work there which was supposed to be a steady job which he gladly took, and then I didn't want to spend any more money than I had to. When it came to the last of the brown sugar I just gave them to my two little kids and I did without it with the porridge. That last month I wanted to spend as little as I could. That were the sacrifices we did during the Depression along with so many other people. I am sure I was not the only one. Some were more fortunate of course - those that were established you know. But when you just start, you start with nothing. It is just like a business, you start a business on small money. You do it but you have got to be careful and know that you get no wages for yourself and it takes time before you have enough to call your own.

Q. Did you have any time for yourself at all?

A. With 8 children in less than 14 years? No. I did my sewing, I did my knitting and I washed diapers for 8 children on the board. I washed for ten ~~house~~ of us on the board.

- Q. Did you ever think sometimes that you couldn't stand it any more?
- A. I felt there would never be an end to it sometimes. Not all the time, if I saw other people it was okay, it boosted me up. If I didn't see people every week, or if I couldn't go to church - that is why I went to the United Church actually, that is what took me over there because by going there every week it gave me a boost.
- Q. What was the longest period you went without seeing anybody?
- A. I don't know, weeks or a month.
- Q. What did you do? That must be very very depressing.
- A. In a place like that, you've got to carry water in to cook, to wash, to wash your floor, to wash your children, to do the washing, to do everything. That is a lot of water to carry, and that takes a lot of us. There is wood to be carried in, there is ashes to take out, there is water to take out, there a clothesline was never too close to a house as a rule. You have to make bread once or twice a week for that many people. You had to go and dig your potatoes if you had them, you have to go and work your garden.. You have to sew, in those days we patched, not like today. We patched clothes in those days so it was Monday; wash, Tuesday you did the ironing that we don't do today; Wednesday you mended and you mended socks until you couldn't mend them any more. You patched and sewed buttons. So you wash your dishes you wash the little faces, the little hands, put them back to bed and the next morning you shoo the covers and you made the beds again and you feed them and all that and you are busy. There comes a time when you want to see someone from outside.
- Q. You just have to get away for a little while.
- A. Yes, you have to otherwise you would just - you get so lonesome, you feel there will never be an end to it. It is as if you were caught in a trap.
- Q. So you did feel trapped sometimes?
- A. Yes, I did. If I saw somebody talk to somebody, I was up again. As long as I could break loose. Break from the burden of the family where I was tied down and I won't leave them, they were my children and I stood by them at all times until they were about 18. There was joy and a lot of sorrow and disappointment.
- Q. Can you tell me about that? What would make you particularly happy, aside from seeing your children grow up happy and intelligent?

- A. To know that your children are away and you see that they are going to do well for themselves. They grow up to be honest women. What more do you want?
- Q. That was completely fulfilling for you?
- A. Yes. What more could I wish for? They choose good men, they were not hippies - they were reserved. They choose their company also.
- Q. Do you believe there has been a positive change for women's roles in this community, for say, your daughter?
- A. I think so. They are freer. In my time, women had to be so careful not to look sideways - you're talked about - or you don't have to do nothing but people will think something. You didn't dress like I am dressed now. No matter how hot it was you had to have stockings on. Today the women are so free - they are so lucky. Oh, if I had the chance that the girls have today.
- Q. If you did have the chance to be my age, what do you think you would like to do?
- A. I would travel and I would go for mission work.
- Q. Why mission work?
- A. To help the less fortunate.
- Q. So, you like giving things.
- A. Right now, I bet you I am the only person who does what I am doing right now.
- Q. What are you doing?
- A. Of course I work with the hospitals, I donate good things, new things or almost new things. Sometimes they have too much and what can they do with that but pack those good clothes and have them burnt. One day I said we should make quilts for the poor with that. So far this year I have made six quilts. All it costs me is just 2 or 3 dollars to make and if I have quite a few on hand sometimes and if I sell them I usually turn the money over to the hospital.
- Q. So you would like to do missionary work in Canada?
- A. Abroad.
- Q. Any country in particular?
- A. In the days when I just would have loved to go to school, I would have went to China.
- Q. I have been to China.
- A. Have you? We have a Chinese girl here. I would do the work here, but as long as I help somebody less fortunate than I am. I don't like to give to people

who can afford to buy. Somebody that needs it, regardless of colour or' creed.

Q. Do you think that you got this attitude because of your childhood - of giving and sharing and hard work?

A. No, I think it was more the Depression. In the Depression after World War I, we were not the only ones who were hard hit. It is like when we were small we went on that bush farm - there were other settlers also- but I don't think they were much better off than we were.

Q. Do you think that your mother taught you a lot of things that were valuable when you had a family?

A. I was not close enough to her.

Q. You wish you had learned more you mean?

A. No. I wanted to look out for myself, I was a bit independant. I have been told that many times and I believe it now.

Q. You must remember the time that they brought in the vote for women? What did you think about that?

A. I think it was good. Why shouldn't we have anything to say, we do half the work. I believe it is right. I don't think the men really stop and think what the, what it is. If they vote, they just vote and that is it. They don't care. And I guess some women too. When I vote, I vote for that man because I think he will do something.

Q. You wouldn't like to get deeper involved in politics though?

A. Not now, I would have once upon a time.

Q. What did you wish to achieve?

A. I would have liked to have been up there and give them my opinion on some things.

Q. When was this?

A. During Depression time. In the 1930's. It was a time when my girls were studying to go to high school and they had to write exams. Well, we had to pay for that - that one dollar meant so much, and of course I didn't like that. I thought some of my girls would be school teachers but they got into anything else but teaching.

Q. Did you teach them to be independant and stand on their own two feet rather than depend on someone?

A. I must have because they are all independant. Some of them, my goodness. The same with me, the smaller ones are so spunky. What I am happy about is that they are all honest women. And they are all hard workers. When they

do something they do it well, they work better than I do.

Q. Well, you must have taught them something.

A. I guess I started them, but, it is like if they are knitting or crocheting, it has to be perfect when they do it.

Q. Is there anything that you would like to see done within your society? Anything about people's rights that you would like to work for? For instance the Women's Movement?

A. I don't know.

Q. Other than missionary work, and you do do a lot of work for the hospital.

A. What I regret, maybe in a larger center it was like that a long time ago although I was young then, but if it was, if such situations existed, then I don't know, I wasn't in the gang. I regret so much - you see some young people with all their lives ahead of them with nothing to do. I have tried because sometimes I had to help some of the women with a group of girls to do something in their clubwork, and they have nothing to do. I say that they should learn to sew, and that I would show them if they wanted. If someone wants to learn, I'm right there - or knit. But they don't seem to be interested. And it seems to me, at least with my sisters, and cousins, we had something that we were working at. At noon hour and recess at school we even had work we could do. We were at it and we were so ambitious and that was the case with everyone, but you don't see that today. And another thing you notice at school, I don't say everyone is like that but that is what I saw, when they learn their sewing at school, they put something crooked or something wrong, they don't want to undo it and start over again. Undo it and start over again and then it will be well done. If I had been a teacher I would have been too strict I guess - I would have expected too much.

Q. It is a hard life and I don't think you can train people too much to go out and face what goes on in the world.

A. And then, it seems to me that we were so busy when we were that age and I don't think that the kids have that today. We had a group of girls for a couple of years, that the school sent to us if we wanted them.

Q. Who is "we", what organization is this?

A. The school teachers. In a way they were to do some work for us. So we waited for the day they were allowed to come out to do our work. Try to see

if you can make them do it. You show them how to go about it, and that is the way I want it to be done and that is the way it is supposed to be done. No way they would do it. That wasn't the way they did it. They want to do what they want and not what we want. When I went to work and I learned when we worked, we do what our mistress wanted us to do , they wanted it done that way and that was it. They don't always send the same girls and we must have had 8 or 10 girls, and if 2 from that 8 or 10 was willing to do the work, that was about it. The kids don't like to learn, they want to teach. I klearned that a long time ago - don't tell me you know how to work better than I do.

Q. I asked you what you would like to do if you were my age, you are obviously very active - what do you plan on continuing?

A. As long as I can.

Q. You just want to keep doing.

A. I hope so. I had one of my aunts from Belgium. She stayed all alone until she was 90 and that was in the country where there is no convenience - carry the water in, carry the ashes out - and she stayed by herself until she was 90. And then I guess came the time that she couldn't do anything else.....

Q. You just showed us what you are doing, the beautiful quilts and knitting and....

A. And my scrapbooks.

Q. You have scrapbooks too? So you like to stay on top of things.

A. In one of my books that I have, I have the first stamp of the hospital when there were only two rooms. I like all history like that.

Thank--you Mrs. Peltier.