

Interview with Helen Lindahl
Interviewer: Robert Alfred Galer.
April 18, 1999

General overview of life on the Keweenaw Bay Indian Reservation L'Anse, MI

RG: What is your ethnic background, birth date, and location of your life?

HL: I am an Ojibwa Indian, I live on the Indian reservation, my birth date is March 20, 1930, and the reservation is Zeeba, MI.

RG: What was life like on the reservation?

HL: Life on the reservation was very hard from the beginning. We only had, we had school that we had to walk five miles to. Only one teacher for four grades, we had to haul our own rotter for miles, we had to cut and saw our own wood for heat, that's the only heat we had was wood heat, we lived in a very small house with only four rooms there were nine children but at that time there were only five living at home. We lived off of the land with fish and wild meats and we had a small garden that we worked in when we got older which was our only survival. Our father worked in the lumber camps and was away most of the time. We didn't have cars or no snowplows at that time. We had to trudge through the deep snow and some days we wouldn't get out for weeks.

RG: Okay is that all you want to say on that question?

HL: Yeah.

RG: Was alcohol use by the Indian people on the reservation illegal any time that you remember?

HL: It was illegal up to I was about 10 or 11 years old and then it became legal and everybody was using it then including both of my parents. It made it kind of hard for us.

RG: What are some of the traditions which you have lived with?

HL: When I was growing up, I never knew none of the traditions. I never even heard of them until I got older, but I do know that we had a grandmother that used to make a lot of Indian medicines out of roots but and she was also a mid-wife so there were a lot of children.

RG: So she was like the reservation doctor at the time?

HL: Yes. She was called for a lot of sick people

RG: Do you remember any of the traditional medicines?

HL: Tobacco was about it.

RG: Do you remember any festivals or ceremonies occurring on the reservation while you were growing up?

HL: No

RG: I mention about that _____

HL: Well the cat meeting was given once a year where they had an outdoor tavern at with people, Native American Indians came from all over to visit for about a week or two and there were church services three times a day including Sunday school. They had the morning service in the Indian language and I remember one pow-wow ceremony that was dedicated all our first creating posts on the _____ Road

RG: Now where is that located?

HL: About two three miles from the reservation between the L'Anse township and Zeeba

RG: Is there any Ojibwa history you remembered?

HL: No

RG: Do you remember what the people thought of the Federal Government or what do the people think of the Federal Government?

HL: Gee I don't know, I have no idea of what they thought. I remember that the government tried to help us in many ways you know like Indian schools, both of my parents went to government school, but I didn't know nothing about those schools they went to.

RG: Do you remember any stories being told of the nineteenth century or old days?

HL: No.

RG: Do you remember any of the food you ate that was considered traditional?

HL: Indian bread, Indian fried bread, _____, corn, venison, fish, they eat a lot of different kinds of meats but I never did, I never ate them. I had a taste of bear meat once, I didn't like it

RG: Do you remember cooking beaver?

HL: Yeah. I didn't like that either. In fact mom never cooked it at home, just venison and fish.

RG: Do you remember any stories being told when you were growing up, history stories, family stories, ghost stories any of them stories, any kind of stories?

HL: Oh I remember some stories about what they used to call the bear walk where they see lights and images of animals, fireballs, I remember my dad talking about the bear walk.

RG: Could you elaborate on that what you remember of the bear walk?

HL: Well when mom and dad first got married there was an old barn not far from their home and there was a big fireball down there by the barn and what grandmother did was took some kind of a rock on a plate and got this rock hot and put some Indian medicine on there and went around the house with that and that fire disappeared, whatever kind of fire that was. I remember that story well and then there was another story about a cousin of mine that was sleeping on the sofa on the downstairs and this little fireball came down the stairway and went over by the sofa where she was and was jumping around the edge of it and the next morning her face was, her mouth was going to one side way over. That's another story about the fireball

RG: Is that the only stories you remember?

HL: Uh huh.

RG: Do you remember any stories being told about how the hunting was or do you remember any stories about hunting or how we hunted?

HL: No I don't remember them. All I know is dad used to bring home the deer and the fish and they used hooks instead of spears like they use nowadays and maybe something else earlier than that I have no idea but I know dad used to pack some of the venison home for miles.

RG: During this time you were growing up, it was a time of sharing, was it not? When people were hungry you gave them meat or potatoes.

HL: Yes, yes and a lot of them used to bring food for us you know and shared their vegetables and all that with us and we used to share alike

RG: Do you remember anything of the fishing your parents did, or the tribe did or members of the tribe?

HL: I don't ever remember the tribe fishing when I was growing up. I remember some fishermen that use to get a lot of herring when I was young but nowadays it seems like they hardly ever get the herring anymore and they used to get tons of it and make a living off of the money they sold this herring the herring off of the nets and I imagine they got other fish too with the nets besides the herring

RG: Do you remember the way they preserved our food, the fish food?

HL: _____ and some of the fruit stayed dried like mom use to dry apples for winter and they also used to put the apples in the ground for the winter and dig them up in the middle of the winter. Winter apples they were called and in these pits were big holes where they lined them with evergreens that keep them from freezing and covered them up good so they wouldn't freeze

RG: Did they smoke the fish or did they dry the fish?

HL: I imagined they did but I've never seen my parents or anybody do that that I remember.

RG: So you remember eating a lot of fresh fish?

HL: Yeah.

RG: Did you get vaccinated against diseases when you were young?

HL: Yes, all the babies got their shots and then the one before you start school what is that one, everybody got that I forget what it is now _____ or something. Three, four shots in one

RG: What do you think of the Tribal Center takeover that occurred in August of 1995 Baraga, Michigan?

HL: I thought it was terrible the things that were done to the people here is very saddening and I don't know how one man could do so much to his own kind. Their still hurting from it. _____ a lot of heartache and anger

RG: Is there anything else you remember or what want to say about what life was like when you were growing up or anything else?

HL: There isn't much more that I remember. I know that we just had the one teacher when we went to the larger school it was just like starting school all over again because she couldn't teach us everything she tried her best but like we never got music taught to us in the small school and when we got down to L'Anse, I didn't know nothing about music, it was like starting school all over again. It was very hard. I think it was not only me but a lot of them.

RG: What do you think of the Federal Government today?

HL: I don't know it's questionable. Sometimes it's right, sometimes it's wrong.

RG: Do you think the Federal Government did a good job in trying to solve our problem?

HL: No, I don't think so. The Federal Government to tell you the truth didn't do nothing for when we had the takeover. I didn't see them do nothing. I mean it just went on and on and they paid no attention to it you know the Bureau of Indian Affairs that is supposed to be looking into this they did things wrong to us look they sent their police here to come and police the people on another reservation when they shouldn't even have had jurisdiction which wasn't right. That's one wrong thing they did. And then the way the elections are going is something else. You just can't get these people out of here you got to pick some way

RG: Was life better before the casino?

HL: Huh?

RG: Was life better before the casino came?

HL: I would say so, yeah. I wonder if other tribes are having the same problems.

RG: Sault St. Marie, Mt. Pleasant, _____, Minnesota

HL: I _____ some of it. I believe so. And you know that thing with this bill _____ money and who gets all the benefit out of it you know? Not the younger people.

RG: Not the elders either. _____

HL: No. The help is terrible on the reservation here even though we got money coming in every day and they can't help you with nothing medicine or doctors, it's terrible. They're donating it all over the place, I don't know why other people need it when their own people need it. That is just like these people over there in Europe now. How can they really do all that to them, they ain't got no homes there running away from their own country and starving to death it's terrible, awful, it's terrible.

RG: Can you recall the happiest moment growing up?

HL: The happiest moment of growing up was when I graduated from school. That's the most happiest moment in my life. It took me many, many years but I did it.

RG: Do you have any stories you remember of your mom? Anything funny?

HL: My mother grew up in an orphanage too so her parents, she only had her mother she never was with her dad. A lot of them couldn't afford to keep them so they got put in an orphanage. I don't know how long she was in there but she was in there for three years until her mother could get back on her feet I guess. She got married when she was 21 so she made her own little home and my dad, when he was growing up they had a farm here but his father drank so much he was very, very mean to the family. The family had to go and hide many times because of his drunkenness. They use to sell the cattle to go and get booze and his life wasn't go easy either.

I guess that is why we drank, we thought that's the way to live way back there is where it started the alcoholism from our grandparents although the mother drank alcohol but the father did, drank enough for the both of them and she had to work too grandma had to walk all the way to town to go to work. There was no cars everything was horse and buggy if you had money enough to get a horse but it looked like to me that they had quite a farm here because they had that great big barn and there was a lot of stuff in there that was used you know for different kinds of cattle, oxen, horses, and cows and grandma use to raise chickens even when I remember when I first went to school she had chickens and pigs.

RG: Is there anything else you want to say Helen?

HL: No I don't think so

RG: This concludes my interview with Helen Lindahl on 4-18-99