

Interview with Elizabeth Galer

Interviewer: Robert Alfred Galer

A General Overview of Life on the Keweenaw Bay Indian Reservation

April 18, 1999

RG: What is your background, Elizabeth, birthdate, location of life...?

EG: My birthdate is November 19, 1926. My background would be what I am. I'm Ojibwa full blood.

RG: Location of life?

EG: Location...that means where I was born right? Dynamite Hill. That was part of the L'Anse Reservation.

RG: Question number 2, what was life like on the reservation?

EG: Up until the age of 9 I lived on Dynamite Hill with my parents and we lived during the Depression. We lived mostly off the land. Dad hunted and sometimes he would trap rabbits and go fishing and berry picking and canning what ever we could grow in the garden. It was all I remember. I was so young.

RG: Your father was a deer hunter and your mother was a fisherman?

EG: She liked to go fishing. I think she did most of the fishing. She took us out a lot...Ma. She knew the real good spots out there on the Silver River. That ran way back of the property.

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

EG: Mainly berry picking. I don't fish. I would like to some time. Some time when we don't have to walk too far to the stream or river.

RG: Is that all you can remember about the traditions you lived with?

EG: I would see Ma early in the morning. She'd be down in the garden. She would really grow nice corn and potatoes and all that stuff. I was probably just in the way. She would hoe the garden. I just remember Dad always bringing home deer in the winter time. It was an old shed connected to the house and I remember the deer hanging in the shed there.

RG: You always had fresh meat in the winter.

EG: And Ma would make moccasin stew. We always had to wear moccasins around the house. The only time we wore shoes was when we had to go to school or town. Ma

always made moccasins out of that deer hide for us. And making maple syrup. We always did that every spring of the year.

RG: Where was the sugar camp at?

EG: I would say it was a good half mile east of where the house was.

RG: That was on Dynamite Hill where the house was where you were born. Down by Hill Road.

EG: It was a good half mile, maybe close to a mile. I can't remember that good because I was just little. But I remember sometimes they would pull me on a sled to go out there because there was still snow on the ground.

RG: Question number 4, do you remember any of the traditional medicines?

EG: No I don't Bob. Did you ever see those big leaves, they like to grow where there's a lot of moisture. They call them elephant ears? They were big leaves.

RG: Were they flowering plants?

EG: No. They were just a weed and they grow close to the ground. There was an opening there as you go up Dynamite Hill. That opening was kind of closed in now, but there was a big opening there and there was always a lot of moisture probably where all that dirt was pushed back and there was moisture on the bottom. It's a wild plant is what it is. Sometimes Mom would get a sore on her neck, every year that would come on. I was telling Grandma about that and she said Indian women got that in those days. That was weird. I remember it was something on her neck that came on at a certain time of the year. It was kind of like, oh what do you call it...something that comes at a certain time of the year. I'll think of the word after. I remember walking down to that opening. I can take you to Dynamite Hill and show you. I looked there sometime. I wanted Dad to stop there sometime. Anyway, I remember walking down there with her and she would get those big elephant ears. She used to make some kind of _____ out of that and put it on her neck. That must have been some form of Indian medicine. That's the only thing I remember. I can show you the plant even. I don't see it around here. We should take a ride out there and look around some time.

RG: Yes we will go out there and look around. It's not very far away, only a few miles.

EG: I know.

RG: Number 5. Do you remember any festivals or ceremonies when you were growing up?

EG: Not at all. No Indian...if they did have anything it was probably in Diva. I don't remember going to anything. Grandma Miller always having a big meal up there at the

pinery. At the cemetery. She made that a tradition every Memorial Day to have a big...kind of like a memorial dinner.

RG: A Memorial Feast?

EG: There you go. Grandma had a great big long picnic table up there. That soon got...that tradition kind of went out after Grandma died. Then the weather changed and after a while they couldn't have it up there at all because it was so cold. Ellen said half the time it was raining and kind of half snowing. So that just kind of went. But they still have a get together on Memorial Day. But now they go to somebody's house. Remember Sheryl had us over to her house last year. That's the only thing I remember. Maybe Helen would know more if something was done around there.

RG: Do you remember Chippewa history? Do you remember your mother or your father telling you Chippewa history?

EG: I know they talked Indian so much. The only thing I know is they taught us to talk Indian, and that's all I knew how to talk, I guess, when I went to the orphanage. But I soon forgot it. But you know, now I remember words every now and then. A single word. I could never make a sentence. I know some of the words.

RG: What was life like in the orphanage? Question number 7.

EG: What was it like there? I would say sometimes it was good. Sometimes it was bad. You have the good days and the bad days. It really was kind of like I was so young. Everything was all new to me. I didn't know how to accept it at first. But being here with other kids, that feeling goes away. It went away. Of being lonely, missing your parents, because you're with other kids all the time. They were so strict. We always had to do what we were told. Instant obedience. That's what it was all about.

RG: Did that punish you for speaking your language? The Ojibwa language.

EG: No. They really didn't punish us for it. That was just one of the things I was saying. When they tell you not to do something you don't do it. You don't question. You don't ask why or nothing. You just obey. In other words, you don't give them no hassle. Don't give anyone a hassle.

RG: Is there anything else you want to say about the orphanage?

EG: No. Not really.

RG: Ok. Question number 8. What did the people think of the federal government? Do you remember anything being said by your mother or father or grandma or anybody about the federal government?

EG: No. I was too young then. We really weren't told on anything except that we were Indian. That was our race, and that's all we were told. They never did teach us anything on any federal government or anything. In school they just taught us the regular American history and all that stuff. They never taught us anything about traditions or anything.

RG: Do you remember anything about the U.S. history being taught to you in school?

EG: Oh yeah. We went through the whole bulk of U.S. history.

RG: Did they give an actual portrayal of reservation Indians.

EG: No. The only thing the history taught us was about how they used to fight. The Iroquois and all the different fights they used to get into. The different tribes. Just what was in the history book? They never specified anything.

RG: Do you remember anything about the 19th century or the old days? Question number 9.

EG: Like what?

RG: Do you remember anything of your grandmother telling you about her life? Your mom's life? Your father's life? Do you remember anything being told to you of their life?

EG: If they did, I was too young to remember anything or to even pay attention to it. It would be nice to know them things. If I was older. I was just a kid and probably just liked to play around.

RG: Question number 10. Do you remember any of the foods that were considered traditional foods?

EG: Good old deer meat. Venison. That would be the number one I guess. And of course fish.

RG: Berries?

EG: yeah. Blueberries, raspberries. Mom would can all that stuff.

RG: When you're speaking of grandmother, you're speaking of your father's mother?

EG: I'm speaking of my mom. I don't remember. I wasn't around this grandma down here except to come and visit once in a while. I didn't know her that well.

RG: Do you remember any other foods you used to eat?

EG: Mom would trap rabbits. She used to make good rabbit stew with dumplings. That was good. I can remember that. She could really make good dumplings. We ate a lot of potatoes.

RG: Question number 11. Do you remember any stories being told to you?

EG: About what?

RG: Indian stories or family stories or family history stories? No ghost stories?

EG: I guess if they did tell me anything I didn't pay attention. I was too young.

RG: Question number 12. Do you remember anything about hunting?

EG: No not really, other than Dad always bringing home a deer. He was a great hunter. That's why we never went hungry. After a while, Mom probably just knew how to fix that venison.

RG: Is that all you remember about the hunting?

EG: Yes. Because we never went with him.

RG: Question number 13. Do you remember anything about fishing?

EG: You know that one time I don't think it was fishing. Maybe it was berry picking or both combined. I remember we had to cross Silver River way in the back. I told you how it runs there in the back. That would have been east of where the house was. I remember we had to cross Silver River and at the area where we crossed, oh man it was deep down and a big tree had fallen over the Silver River. I remember Dad had to take us one by one across that river on that log. Took my two sisters and Mom. Took Mom by the hand and my sisters, but he took me on his back. And I remember I was the last one to go, and I remember him telling me not to look down, but if we should fall, for me just to stay on his back. But we didn't. We all made it safely across and then he took us to some, oh it was further way out. They called it Billiards Camp. Maybe they went hunting out there, but there were kind of like a couple of old buildings out there. Like an old camp. I remember picking blackberries out there, but I don't remember why we went out there. Whether it was hunting or what. But I don't remember shooting everything. It was kind of like in a big open field. The grass was tall and everything. Maybe it was in the fall because there was apples on the trees, and I remember Dad was taking a walk around there and there were some apple trees and he said he could tell the bears had been there. Must have been just a regular hunting place.

RG: Do you remember where it is today?

EG: Probably all grown over. I remember us sleeping over night. They had kind of like wooden bunks up against the walls. We came back the next day. I don't know how old I was. I was six or seven. But that's all I remember.

RG: Do you remember any other fishing stories?

EG: No, other than that Mom would take us fishing. It must have been Silver River. It was still east again, where she took us fishing, Theresa, Mary, and I. That's where she would stand out on that rock there in that river and just catch them brook trout and fry them in one of those frying pans with a big long handle. Those are antiques. You don't see them anymore. Use to fry them right out there with a little fire by the river.

RG: Question number 14. Do you remember the way they preserved their food? The fish?

EG: No they never did that. They never preserved and fish or deer. Mom never canned any meat. The only thing she canned was berries.

RG: You don't remember them smoking fish or drying fish?

EG: No. They never ever did.

RG: So it was always eaten fresh?

EG: And I don't remember us every eating those big fish that you get from _____. It was always form the rivers up there. We caught it there in the river.

RG: Do you remember when you were growing up, was alcohol use by the Indian people on the reservation illegal at that time?

EG: That I don't know either. Helen would know that one.

RG: Question number 15. What do you think of the takeover they had on the Keweenaw Bay Indian Tribal Center in August 1995?

EG: I would say it was just something useless because nothing ever came of it. Did it? No. It was just a waste. Just a lot of people hurt and what good came of it? It's something that should never have happened. When you look at it now, and you see the way things are, it's something that should have never come about. I don't know. People they don't want to get together on anything. It's just a certain group. How can you accomplish anything when there's just a chosen few. We've got to all get together. To tell you the truth, I don't want any part of it. When I see how things turned out. All there is left now seems like people hating one another. We're not supposed to be hating one another. What do you think?

RG: I'm not the one begin interviewed. Is that all you want to say?

That concludes our interview on April 18, 1999. Robert Alfred Galer interviewing Elizabeth Galer. Maiden name, Elizabeth Miller.