

Interview with Mrs. Verna Patronella Johnston - April 5, 1982

"I was born on Cape Croker reserve. That's my mother (pointing to their pictures on the livingroom wall) and that's my father. My father was an Indian chief and my mother was English, Irish and Scotch. Of all the people in that picture the only one that is still alive is the child on my mother's knee and that was taken during the First World War. I'm not in that picture. My sister Ann died. Frank was the one that died with diphtheria. And Charlie I buried just the week before Christmas.

(The pictures of her parents are in I Am Nokomis Too)

"I was born in Cape Croker and most of my life was spent with Grandma LaValley. Because I was born on the fifteenth of February and Frank was born one year later on the twentieth of February. And my great grandmother was concerned that I might not get the attention that I should because he was the first boy. And I was the third girl in the family. Once the boys started coming they never stopped. I had nine of them - nine brothers.

"Grandma LaValley was the most important person in my life as I grew up and also there are things I still remember that my mother used to say to me. People find me hard to work with at times. Because I want things done right. I'm what you call ... They say you're not an alcoholic, you're a workaholic. I believe that goes back to something my mother said to me one time. I was the youngest girl and so I always had to do the beds and do the work upstairs. And of course I was no workaholic then and when I swept the upstairs floors - because we only had hard wood floors - where the top blanket came down I swept the dirt under there. One time my mother came upstairs and she said 'Vern, the dirtiest dirt is not always the dirt that shows.' And you know that made such an impression on me that I can't do anything now in any place without moving everything and getting underneath. That has influenced my whole life. I never forgot that.

"The other thing my mother used to say - 'Where there's a will there's a way.' But I have never heard 'The dirtiest dirt is not always the dirt that shows.' Coming from my mother she always had a clean upstairs after that. So people find it very hard to work with me, maybe even to live with me.

(What made you come to Toronto?)

"I came with my two grand-daughters, Lana and Marlene. Marlene was still in school and Lana wanted to go to Shaw's. So I came with them and I had a walk-up apt. on Broadview, on Hogarth St. right across from Riverdale Zoo, right across that valley. Then I was asked to go to Moraviantown and do a craft course through Indian Affairs - education. And while I was away they had a cousin move in. And then there was an old gentleman here in Toronto and he found out I was here. He was in the Mental Hospital at 999 but all his life he had come to Cape Croker for holidays. His name was Mr. Ramsey and his grandfather was old John Fisher who was once mayor of Toronto. He lived on Blythwood Road. He lived in the old farm house. All his assets went into Public Trustee. And he asked that I be allowed to live in his house for as long as he lived. And so I moved there. And before I knew it I had a boarding house there, for Indian girls. For a long time I only took girls, but I eventually [took boys]. Louis Cameron was the first boy I took. About 16 year ago.

I've been in Toronto about 16 years.

"When Roy died the property was sold and I had to get out of there. And I ended up on 67 McGill St. in a huge house. I had 4 floors there. It had been a Ryerson Residence. I'm telling you I knew the minute I walked in there the kids had lived there because everything was painted black and purple and kelly green. What kind of a world I used to say to myself do these kids live in. I had some very strange experiences in that house. The first night I was there, Norman Thomas, one of my borders, was out, so I couldn't lock up. Nothing was settled or anything. We'd just moved everything in that day. So I put up a bed in the front room next to the street and went to bed. I thought I'll hear Norman when he come in and I'll get up and lock the door. All of a sudden I woke up and there was a man standing by my bed looking at me. I got so angry and I ordered him out. He went out. He said, 'I'm sorry' and he went out. But he didn't go out of the house. I heard him go into the kitchen. I went to the phone and I picked up the receiver and I said, 'Now you get out, or I'll call the police.' Which was the wrong thing to do if he had wanted to harm me. And so he left. And then right away the next day I got someone to come and change the locks. But you know the next night at midnight somebody came to the door again. It was the same man and he said, 'I came back to apologize.' I said, 'At midnight!' And I believe those students from Ryerson had some drugs. And maybe there was some stashed in that house and that was what he was looking for because he came back 3 times.

"I was at 67 McGill when I retired. I did 2 courses at Moraviantown in crafts and the last time I was there it was in the winter time and they had the flu very bad and an old gentleman died and a child died from it. But I thought I escaped. I thought I got home without it. But after I got home I got sick and I ended up in the hospital and I had virus pneumonia. So Stella came down and just got rid of all the borders and said you're going home. So that's what happened. When I came out of the hospital there were no borders or anything there so I went back to Cape Croker.

"Altogether for 9 years I ran boarding houses for Native students. So about 6 years ago, I went back to the Cape. And I didn't stay a year. Because by that time I had Hodgkin's Disease.

"I signed the contract for my book when I was in the hospital and diagnosed with malignant tumors. And Dr. Rogers and Ellen Stacey and one other person came to the hospital and got me to sign the release of my stories for a book, because no one expected me to live. They had already diagnosed my illness as malignant tumors and I had a great big tumor here and you can see where they did the biopsy and they said it was malignant.

And I'll never forget that day because I heard the doctor, his name was Dr. Johnston, and I heard somebody come to say to him outside my bedroom door that night before 'We have Mrs. Johnson's report,' and my doctor never came in so I knew it wasn't good or he'd have come and told me. So he came in the next morning and he said the diagnosis is malignant tumors and we'll have to find somebody that deals in drugs to deal with it because it's in a vital spot and we cannot use the normal things like radium or any of those things on you. And then he went out.

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"But you know in my mind I had already accepted it. When I knew I had tumors I had accepted it. So when the Doctor went out that morning in a few minutes the nurse came in with a needle and I said, 'What's that for?' And she said, 'Well, Dr. Johnston ordered it for you.' 'Well I said you give it to Dr. Johnston.' I think he needs it more than I do.' Because it must be terribly hard for a doctor to come and tell a patient that.

"And then all my family were here in Toronto, so I phoned them and I said the diagnosis is malignant tumors. I had more than one here. They found some in my stomach that lay on my back bone. And I said, 'If you want to be upset then you be upset at home.' I said, 'Don't you dare come to my hospital room and be upset. And nobody came near me for 48 hours.

"I came back to Toronto because I had Hodgkins and my doctors were here. So I finally came back. I was home less than a year. And then I phoned Millie Redmond after I got here. And she said, 'Come and see me.' And I went there and she hired me. I was there almost 4 years. It was a long time I was there. (at Anduhyaun)

"I counselled. I taught crafts. I did cooking. I taught them how to set up a kitchen. I even taught a cooking course under Manpower for Gene Solomon there. And when the course was over he came and I gave him a lunch and he came to the kitchen and he said to me, 'I would recommend you for any hotel in Toronto.' And imagine that now I did a menu for Airport Hilton! It doesn't seem believable to me. I got this phone call and the man said, 'I'm from the Airport Hilton, I'm the Chef.' And he said, 'We've phoned everywhere we can think of in Toronto to find somebody that knows something about Native traditional food. 'Finally,' he said, 'we phoned Indian Affairs and they gave me this number and your name.' He said, 'Would you come out and see us?' So I wasn't enthused about it at all and I said, 'Well, you set a date and if I can come I will. And then I phoned him and I said I wasn't coming. He said, 'Well, we'll set up another date for you.' And I thought, 'Well, if they're going to be that persistent I might as well go and see him and get it over with. So Grant Jones was here and his girlfriend so they drove me out and they talked ...

"I had some very emotional things when I was at Anduhyaun. We took in a boy one time. It was very very cold and he had no place to go. He couldn't get into a hostel. So he stayed there over night and in the morning he came into the kitchen and he was making toast. And one of the young counsellors came in and she came and grabbed the toast out of the toaster and put it down and she said, 'You're not supposed to be here. You can't eat here.' And he couldn't talk. He could say a few words now and again but he had a vocal distress somehow he couldn't seem to get things out. And I looked at him and I thought what if that was one of my sons, one of my grandsons, and you know I didn't know I was crying and I didn't know that Millie Redmond was standing at the door watching. So I said to him, 'You sit out there in the hallway. I will make your toast and I'll put some butter and would you like jam on it, and I'll bring it to you. And the counsellor tried to take the bread out of my hand. And Mrs. Redmond said, 'Let Mrs. Johnston handle it.' And I thought if I had a son or grandson or any relative and he was that cold or that hungry and someone refused him a crust of bread, how he would feel. Even yet I get upset over it. So that counsellor left. And that upset me