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LA RONGE, SASKATCHEWAN
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Childhood in the bush.
- Residential school including work in the kitchen.
- Various jobs in La Ronge and Saskatoon.
- Work on school committee in La Ronge.

Muriel Ross interviewed by Janet Fietz, 1 October 1981, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, for the Oral History Project INDIAN AND METIS ELDERS OF LA RONGE. (Partial transcript and translation from Cree.)

I was born at Little Hills on the Montreal River. I remember a few things about my childhood. My father used to hunt for moose. We used to eat meat most of the time. My mother used to tan the moose hides. We children used to haul dry sticks for her so she could keep the fire going while she was drying meat and cooking for us. They were only small sticks as we were not very big at the time. After we were done hauling wood for my mother, she would let us play after we got our chores done. There were quite a few of us children in the family. Jeanie and I were the oldest.

When I was old enough to go to school, I went to school alone. I remember some people that were working at the school at that time. Miss Eva Smith looked after the laundry. Another one looked after the kitchen. Her name was Miss McDonald. The other one was Miss Seal. She looked after the girls. She was a very old lady. The other one was Mr. Charles Hives. He looked after the whole school. He was also a preacher at that

time.

We had lots of work to do at the school. Some worked in the laundry, washing and mending. I worked in the kitchen. There were about six of us there. Working half a day, I used to make and bake bread. One girl I remember was Matilda Smith. She used to wash all the pots and pans in which we used to cook our meat and fish. Then came a time when I took her place washing frying pans and any other cooking pots that had to be washed. I used to bake bread for the whole school. Sometimes while I was eating I had to get up and check my bread so it would not get burned while it was in the oven. I used to run and sit down again to finish my meal.

When I left school, I lived with my parents for about two years. I used to trap muskrat. My father used to give us part of the river where we trapped while he trapped further away from home. He used to give us a few traps to trap with. We did real good as there were lots of muskrat where we used to do our spring trapping.

After that, I married a man from Stanley Mission. I stayed with him a few years but I soon came home to La Ronge. He stayed behind. I looked for a job here in La Ronge. They had started a Handicraft Shop here and I found a job there. I

worked there for twelve or thirteen years cutting out sheep-skin slippers, jackets, and other things people ordered. We sold these to tourists and local people. Sometimes I worked as a clerk upstairs. We did our cutting in the basement part of the building. Sometimes I used to be boss when our boss was away.

I left that job for a while when I went to work at the Northland Hotel cleaning rooms, changing beds and also doing laundry. This was a part-time job. As I finished there, I went to work at the Handicraft Shop. I worked at the hotel in the morning and then went to work at the shop. Finally the shop was closed while we were working there. We had to look for other jobs. We found jobs in Saskatoon, me and Mrs. McKay. We stayed over there for about a month tanning moose hides and other animal hides such as fox, bear and beaver pelts. We left there and came home.

When we were working at the Handicraft Shop, we cut out moccasins. We gave these out to women who put beads on and sewed them together. There was quite a few women working there. The ones that did the best sewing on jackets and moccasins did the sewing on these things. The ones that make the jackets get the best pay, the others less.

Some that worked there were Mary Ann Derocher and Angelique Halkett. Angelique Halkett used to cut out jackets. She sewed them together too. She did real good work. Once they had a contest to see who could finish one pair of moccasins first. The others who worked there were Margaret Ross, Jeanie Ross and Muriel Ross. When they started sewing, the first one to finish

was Angelique Halkett. She said that she did not want me in the contest as I sew too slow.

We have a few houses now. They are made real good on this reserve. They look real good from the outside too. There are lots of people that need houses yet. But these people without houses, their own relatives take them in.

There are homes being built at Hall Lake. They are also building a church over there. There are lots of trappers. We have not been told to move over there yet because the houses they are building over there are better than the ones here. But the houses we live in now are warmer in the winter than the ones we had before.

I still work amongst our people helping in any way I can. I am on the School Committee. We have lots of meetings about the children, how to run the school, and about hiring teachers.

We go all over the place to have meetings, even to Sucker River. We also went to Waskesiu just lately. There were lots of people there from all over the place. Some of these people came from Grandmother's Bay, Sucker River, Regina, Duck Lake and La Ronge. These are all treaty people with some white people who are heads in the school programs.

The thing we talked about most was that Indian children should not forget the Indian way of life, how he was brought up by his parents, and the Indian language. In school, they write in Cree now sometimes. Victoria Roberts is an Indian who speaks Cree. She is the teacher that teaches the children to write in Cree. She also talks to them in Cree which I think is very good. I wish we had more teachers like her. This way, the children learn the Indian ways and beliefs. When we were in school, we were told to talk in English only. We were not supposed to talk in Cree. Anyone talking Cree would get themselves into trouble. We got whipped for talking Cree.

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