

Interview with Margaret Elena White

March 28, 1976

Interviewed by Dave Pysock

DP: Good afternoon my name is Dave Pysock [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], today is March 28, and I am doing an interview with Margaret Elena Liture White [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], who is from Milwaukie, Quebec, Canada. She was born in 1910 she is now 66 years old and now living in Big Bay Michigan. Her parents, her mother was an Algonquin Indian, and her father was a French Canadian. They were both born about the year 1860, what Elena and I are going to be talking about today is comparing the way of life of the traditional Indian, as compared to the way of life of when the white man came in. When Elena was younger she used to live in the woods most of her life and as she got a little bit older, she started living the white man's way of life, and what we are going to do today is compare the two different ways. So Elena can you tell me as much as you can remember about your parents?

EW: I guess I will just start from the time that we left Milwaukie, we, ____ birch barking ____ my dad and my brother, and we tagged along the way and we would stop wherever there was, at the place in the springtime we would stop wherever there was there was pelts, you know beaver, we would catch the beaver and then we skin them and dry the skin hide and then whenever we would go to where there was people we would trade the pelts for flour and salt and salt pork at that time there was lots of salt pork the Indians went for that pretty much ____ and anyways we would stop where there was fur and camp. One place we stayed about two weeks because one of my sisters was born and we waited there until my mother was strong enough to travel. We start traveling and go around and whenever there was a place where we had the ____ all of us children would have to carry something small and, it was no different how small we were we had to carry something because to ____ we done that about 2 or 3 years I guess, travelling from one place to the other, and then we go to St. Patrick's Lake, and stayed in a, my mother, in a shack, but it was kind of a house, to me it was a shack because it was made out of timber and we stayed there for a long time ____ stayed before us in that place, so we stayed there for a long long time and I got married.

DP: Can you tell me about the way you lived between going from camp to camp and year after year, like when you were in the woods when you were younger how you did things?

EW: Well we used to kill moose in the summer time, my dad did not me because I was too small. And we'd cut the hooves out and dry it, because it was in the summer time. There was sometimes mother would salt some of that meat and we would have like fresh meat, not dry meat all the time and whenever the fall, whenever the trout used to spawn, we used to go to spear some trout that we would salt after the winter, and we would eat that during the winter time during lent especially, when dad was there. All during lent we had to eat fish like ____ the beaver we eat that, I remember we used to catch fish and we didn't catch beaver in the summertime just in the fall and in the spring, sometimes in the winter time, but summertime we didn't hunt the beaver. And we had muskrats, mink, otter, and fisher, link, bobcat, all that kind of fur we used to catch. And we would skin them down, my dad he skinned that fur and my mother folded them and then they stretched them on the, stretched them on the ____

DP: A trap,

EW: ____ and then they would lay that beaver skin on there to dry. The muskrats, you take a willow twig and then you bend that, you know like that and put the muskrat on there, and then everybody would go out there and pull that ____ at the same time, and you do that with sticks that you got in the woods, you know,

DP: What did you do with all of these skins and pelts?

EW: We used to sell them to a place where they buy fur like that, it used to be some white fur buyer from Milwaukie and then from Ottawa that used to come and buy the fur where we were staying, and other places we would trade the pelts for flour and beans and peas, sugar, salt pork.

DP: What about medicine, what did you use for medicine in them days?

EW: We used to use herbs, like all kinds of herbs that you can get in the woods, course I don't know their name. Like my mother know the name and I don't know that I remember for a person that, I ____ that is a blood root, you break that root you see the blood coming out of it you bought it down and drink the water, it's the only one that I can remember the name. But for fever they made a ____ had fever and mom would get the ____ root then she would give us that little bag root for fever, and when we had ear ache, she would take that grease from the otter's tail, she would put that by the fire that otter's tail and she would keep that oil, and that is what she put in our ear to take the ear aches away. And toothache there is a root, I don't know the name of it, but there is a root that is picked for a toothache and ____ is ____ we never had any doctor's medicine of any kind, we didn't know what doctors were. There was sixteen in our family and my dad put us all in this sort of ____.

DP: So your father delivered all the kids by himself?

EW: Yeah.

DP: And he did this while you were moving from camp to camp?

EW: Yep.

DP: Can you tell me how you lived like during the summer and during the winter?

EW: In the summer time, when mom used to clear out some ground especially where there was all those trees, she would take all those older trees and she would plant some stuff there, ____ she would take that from place to the other and keep planting. She would plant that corn and stuff like that and then in the winter time we would have what she growed in the summer time, we would have that for the rest of the winter, vegetable work.

DP: So what were the kinds of vegetables that you grew, or herbs, whatever?

EW: Well mom used to grow tomatoes, onion, and corn. She would dry that corn and then whenever she wanted to eat that corn, she would take some ashes from the stove and she'd fix that corn so it would be real soft and we could make soup with it or just eat it like that. And we would ask ____ do and after, we would make it in the wintertime, well then my dad and my mom they do the hunting all winter, and then they just put the pelt away until the guy would come along, and he would come along like once a year and would pick up the pelts. And then, we had two or three bags of pelts for the fur buyer to get and this fur buyer was from Ottawa, his name was Goldberg [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] and he's a Jew. He used to bring up some ____ and jewelry and things like that, and my mom used to buy

some ____ from him to make dresses and clothes for us. But the Jewish never bought any of the clothes, they didn't have no use for them, they never wore jewelry of any kinds, if we did it would be a necklace made out of ____ wood, that's only kind of jewelry that we would have. Anyway she used buy the ____ to make dresses ____ more or less run it back. And our footwear we had moccasins for the winter time she would make us bear hide moccasins that doesn't get wet and,

DP: Mukluk like?

EW: No they were just like moccasins that she would make. The fur wasn't on there, just the plain bear hide, but the water wouldn't don't go through that, you can walk it the water but it won't go through. And dad, him and my brothers used to make their footwear with the moose, he would take the back leg of a moose you know, it kind of looked like that,

DP: The calf?

EW: Yeah, they called it moose shack and that would take all the heat up, but we had snowshoes to walk in the winter time, us kids we didn't go very much because my dad would make a shack and we would stay in that shack through the winter.

DP: So you pretty much stayed in one place you didn't move around during the winter?

EW: No, because it was too cold to move around. Except one time we decided to move to an old depo that was still in the woods, there was nobody else around and we were moving there with the sleighs and everybody was dragging a sleigh with the stuff on it and I remember my brother, I was on my brother's sleigh, or it was me and my sister I am not sure, and he had us wrapped up in blankets and he was going down a hill and dropped the ____ line that was holding the sleigh and that sleigh when down the hill and turned over in the snow and it was a good thing we weren't covered over the head because we would be all ____ we crossed a lake and my mother was carrying the baby and she sunk in the water right under, right under the water, because of the baby she would have sunk like ____ the ice, so my dad took her out of there and he hurried made a big fire and change of clothes, the baby wasn't wet, just mom. We stayed there for a couple of days until she felt better, then we moved to that big farm ____ people.

DP: Can you tell me how you lived when you were moving from camp to camp, as far as shelters, bedding, and what did you use for food?

EW: For fuel?

DP: Food.

EW: Food, we always brought our food with us, and when we moved from one place to the other, whatever food you bring you had and you bring with you until we hit another keepover, lumberjack keepover and then we would trade fur for flour and stuff like that and we needed flour and salt and that's the way we kept eating from one place to another.

DP: What about when you were moving as far as shelter, you told me that you used to make your own lean to's or something like that?

EW: Yeah my dad used to make a lean to for us to sleep or we would put a tent up, for us kids especially, ____ lean to. Us kids we had a tent, a great big tent, ____ big tent and they would put us all kids in the

tent to sleep. And anyway, we had blankets and my mom must have gotten those from the camps, the lumber camps, we would have to bring that every time we moved from one place to another, we had to bring everything you know. Now, just to, stuff to cook, land dishes to eat, well at that time there was no such thing as glass dishes, they were all tin, tin dishes tin cups and everything tin.

DP: Where did you get all of this from?

EW: Down by a lumber camp.

DP: And you traded for these?

EW: Yeah. And you made your tea over an open fire and food over an open fire, no such thing as a stove. When it came winter time when dad was still _____ fix up a place like a fire place, like _____ and we would make a place there were mom could cook her bread in there too. It was all made out of rock, and she would do her cooking there all winter and this whole time we would _____ lumberjack would stay there and the stove stayed there and we'd use the stove.

DP: Can you tell me about the type of bedding you were telling me about making out of rabbit fur?

EW: Oh well that's, we would catch the rabbit, many many many rabbits and we would tan the hides, we would go to cut all new strips and then you braid it and then you sew it together to make a blanket so there was fur on both sides of the blankets because it is all braided together.

DP: And what was this used for now?

EW: To cover up.

DP: When you slept on snow or something like that?

EW: No, no when we slept on snow you just put them, well you take your snow boots and you take the snow away, and then you put your _____ or something, bear skin or something or whatever you have and then you cover up with the rabbit blanket, because that is the warmest one. The snow boots _____ take all the snow away, take all the snow away right down to the ground.

DP: Now these rabbit furs really kept you warm did you have to sleep with your clothes on stuff?

EW: I don't remember taking my clothes off, except for our feet, but most of the time we slept with them when it was cold, and in the summer time we would put on, sleeping clothes like the nightdress that mom used to make, nightclothes.

DP: How did you used to keep warm? Did you have any tricks of building a fire during the winter? Lean-tos or anything?

EW: Oh yeah, you go by, you see this a lot in in Canada, there are lots of them big rocks, and you make your lean-to towards the rock, you build a fire by the rock, well after that rock is warm it keeps that lean to warm.

DP: That's a big flat rock or something?

EW: One big square rock. You know the face of it is square, that was the best kind to keep warmer you take a tree that is turned it over the way, turn it over you know like, you made your fire at the stump of it, you put your lean-to facing it then your between the fire and the heat and your lean-to.

DP: How do you build these lean-tos?

EW: You cut two little forks, put them down in the ground, then you take one ____ like that, and you put that right where it goes on top, and you take a ____ and you cover it up.

DP: And that was water proof, these lean-tos?

EW: Oh yeah you put the ____ the right way the water won't go through there. You have to have a whole lot of it.

DP: How long does it take to build one of these?

EW: Well whenever there was two or three people it usually doesn't take that long. Because see my, I had two brothers that were big, they were big enough to work, and I had three sisters who was big enough to help, you just put them all together, and one of them done one job and the other one done the other job. In no time flat they got it all built up!

DP: Where did you get the tools to make all this stuff and what kind of tools did you use?

EW: Well we had an axe, we got that from the lumberjacks, and we had that, the axes to cut wood, we even got a cross cut saw from them, I guess we didn't, we had like the real old kind because they all the time _____ axe made out of rocks, and they had knife made out of rocks, they had spear heads and all that stuff was what ____ we never had that because dad was, already knowed better that we have the white people, so that's how come we got all them tools from the lumberjacks.

DP: Can you tell me about, what did your father and mother teach you, yourself, what kind of duties did you have when you were younger?

EW: Well when we was younger we had to all do our share of everything like cooking and fix up the tent or fix up the bed or _____ something like that. We all had, each of us had something to do. When I was about ten years old I guess my mom would show me how to bake bread or learned me how to bake bread.

DP: How did you bake bread?

EW: Well at that time we just had a dry, we had a round and then we had boxes, and we used to get that from the lumberjacks too and when would have to bake break for the lumberjacks and then you mix that stuff at night, you soak that yeast and then you would mix up the flour and then you leave that overnight and then in the morning it ____ then you make your bread, you mix your bread, you but some salt in it, water and flour, you let it raise for a while, then you punch it down, and then you do the same thing again, you put it in the pan and then you cook it after. We used to cook it in a big iron pot like that with the cover on.

DP: A Dutch oven?

EW: No these were, big iron pots, I don't think they called them Dutch ovens, anyway we would make a fire and we would warm up the sand and then we would but the buried pot in the sand, hot sand and that is the way we would cook our bread.

DP: What else did your mother teach you how to do?

EW: She taught me how to knit, she taught me how to make moccasins, she taught me how to make ____ and a blouse. I guess that's about all that she taught me.

DP: Do you remember any of the things that your father taught your brothers how to do?

E: No because the girls were always together with the mother and the boys were always together with the father, so we didn't pay too much attention to what the boys did, we didn't know anything about boys or, like we didn't know what marriage was because my father and mother were strict and they never told us anything about other people but ourselves. Whenever I, we were at St. Patrick's lake generally, we got cows there and pigs and chickens and dad used to make some ____.

DP: Moonshine hey?

EW: Moonshine and the lumberjack used to come over there in the fall when they would go off to the camp dad would make ____ cut the wood and ____ the moonshine and then we started, me and my sister, we started find that funny you know, other people beside us.

DP: You mean you didn't know there were any other people besides your family out there kind of.

EW: No, like you know it was just funny that people coming over there at the house and then me and my sister, and I we started to, stupid I would say we were. We would blacken our faces and put some pants on and step dance and them guys would give us some money for step dancing and I don't know why we put the black stuff in our face, but we were pretty good step dancer, whatever money we would make were mom had to buy us some clothes that she used to go down to ____ to get the stuff for the winter like, flour and sugar and tea and sometimes they would bring apples, and they bring that with a wagon in the fall. A great big long ____ maybe sometimes it would cost 50 dollars for a great big load and big wagon and all this stuff maybe ____ flour and sugar and stuff like that,

DP: So what are,

[END SIDE A, BEGIN SIDE B]

EW: Not too far from where we lived on St. Patrick Lake and we used to come over there on Sunday because you know my dad and my mother when there were kids, and they used to come there, I guess I didn't know any better, or I was never told about anything, so he got a liking for me and he wanted me for his wife and,

DP: How old were you at this time?

EW: Fourteen years old. And I stayed with him all winter, not being married, and the next summer I didn't know what was the matter with me, because I never was told anything about it, I was in ____ so we got in touch with the sheriff, I had a urge that my dad was looking for me, and we got in touch with the sheriff and the sheriff came and got us and he brought us to town one day, ____ anyway, it was a jail, and I was in jail for one month and my lawyer told me if I didn't get married I would be sent to

reformatory school. So I heard a whole lot of bad stuff about reformatory school, so I got married instead.

DP: Now your first husband he was an Indian?

EW: Yep, pure Indian. And I got married in July first, and my son was born August the 13th the same year.

DP: Did you have any idea what year this was about?

EW: What?

DP: What year this was about?

EW: Yeah it was 1925.

DP: 1925, okay.

EW: And anyway we went up to ____ Lake again, where we lived before, and we lived there until, oh, first of all we went up to ____ Lake, and then we started down the river whenever when I took sick to have the baby. When, that was quite always in the woods and we started down the river and I took sick and there was some American doctors there that at the _____ and that is when my first child was born, and 15 minutes after he was born ____ got up went out to take my picture and he said ____ my mother seen it though, and then we went down to ____ Ontario, and I got the baby christened, and I got Mr. and Mrs. Bardner [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] to be the godfather and godmother and then we went back home to the lake again, and we stayed there until I was in ____ with my daughter. Then we went to St. Patrick Lake with my mothers' grave,

DP: And you were living in the woods all this time?

EW: Yeah, when I went to St. Patrick Lake to my mother we were still in the woods, so I had my daughter there.

DP: What were some of the jobs you were doing when you were married to your first husband? As being a wife and living in the woods.

EW: Well I just did hunting and cooking and things like that whenever _____ while I was in the woods. And then after my daughter was born, we went to the nearby Black River and we shacked and my sister lived very close to that place where she lived at that river, and we stayed there for the winter, and then the summer we went back down to the lake. And then we come back to, we came back to Black river ____ that my sister was born from there, ____ family with her. My third child and my sister came up to take care of me, but she never had any children herself so she didn't know what to do, and my brother in law, he was living there not too far away, so he came and he doctored me, that was for my third child. And then we stayed there with the Black river ____ for a while, we went back to ____ Lake, all this while we was hunting and children was bigger and things like that to keep up with the food,

DP: Was it pretty much the same kind of way that you used the skins for money?

EW: Yeah the same thing. And in a way I, we stayed at ____ lake for a while and then we came back to Black river, then I got a family for my other daughter, and we stayed there, the people were, we stayed there for, Black river ____ and there was nobody there we was all alone, there was no neighbor or

village kind of, just time my husband and my kids, and then the time come for my daughter to be born, that was my second daughter, I doctored myself because there was nobody else that know anything about it and after that we stayed there all summer, then my husband ___ Fire Ranger for that summer, went back to Fire Ranger because we had too many kids to move around and hunt, at least that is what I figured but,

DP: So because you had so many kids you couldn't afford and stay in the woods anymore you had to get a white man's job?

EW: Yeah, well, in a way. I got my family away from my last boy, and we moved down to Deep river Ontario, and from Deep river we moved to ____ and we stayed there quite a bit by the Ottawa River, near an Indian family Mr. and Mrs. Doe. And Mrs. Doe took care of me when I had my last son, then after that me moved up to Furgeson's [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] place. And I started a ____ and bread baking in the sand, and that is where kept my children alive and full with the money I make from that sort of food for the tourist path there.

DP: So that's pretty much the time in your life from living in the woods to changing into a white man's life?

EW: Yeah, but we were still living with the Indians, mostly because all along there, along the Ottawa River there were Indians there, and I learned how to do things different than the Indian way then and I get a job here and there and I had to work to support my family because my husband was no good after he got in with the white people. He didn't want to work anymore, he didn't want to hunt anymore, he didn't want to do nothing anymore.

DP: Why do you think that was?

EW: I don't know, I think it is because he was in the woods all his life, I think that is what was the matter, didn't want to get involved with the white people I think. Anyway, we went to the woods, and we end up there with my oldest son, and that is when he got that, ingrown toenail, cut that and it turned into gangrene, and he had to get the doctor to cut his leg above the knee and a couple years after he died, of course I have met Leo before that two times before that and anyway, we started talking and we got together and then after that marriage with Leo, I went up to Brown [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] river.

DP: So your first husband died from that gangrene and then you met Leo.

EW: Well I met him before that, two times before that, but had my husband,

DP: And you had the five kids, and were the kids old enough to leave you now?

MW: Oh yeah, the older kids were all old enough except two of them, I had with me. Two girls, but the boys they could take care of themselves. And anyways, we went up to ____ River and Leo worked at the well there, he got a job on a boat first, and then he started working up in there, and we stayed there for a long time, 5 or 6 years I guess, and then I got Mary, that's Leo's daughter, and we still stayed there for a while and then we end up to another place, oh, Redwood [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] Leo went up to the camp and I stayed at the place there that ____ we stayed there in the kitchen part of their house, they rented us that part, they were living in the _____. I stayed there all winter while Leo was at the camp. And then we went down to ____ again,

DP: Now this is kind of city type life or suburbia?

EW: No it was kind of a, like here it is not a big place but they had a big hydro dam there. So you worked at the dam,

DP: But it is no more in the woods?

EW: No, and then after that, Leo took ___ for the state, so well first of all, we didn't go to ___, he came to see me, and he worked there and then we went up to Medicine Hat, Alberta, and then we stayed there for a while, in the winter.

DP: Now through your whole life here, through your younger years almost half of your life you lived in the woods, and now all of the sudden you change life with your second husband and you went from the woods and living in kind of a White Man's society, how did this affect you after living half of your life in the woods? How did this affect you and what are your feelings about that?

EW: Well it is kind of a, glad to get away from the woods. That is the only feelings I have, and I wouldn't have to be stuck in the woods all the time and be ___ by the mosquitos and black flies and the horse flies all that stuff that you get living in the woods.

DP: What were the things that you liked about living in the white man's society?

EW: Well that is much better, you don't have to hunt or do any of that thing, and white man work and you get paid for it, so you can buy whatever you want.

DP: Now you live with the white man and coming out of the woods being and Indian, how were you treated as an Indian, how did the white man treat you?

EW: The same as anybody else as far as I know. They didn't have anything against me, they had lots of fun I heard them say things but I didn't pay no mind to it, because I didn't know how to live with that people. I never lived with them, just with my parents so it was a really better fit for me and everyone, all the people, and I couldn't talk very good English, some of them laughed at me, and that hurt a little bit, but I got used to it, I didn't pay any attention to it after a while it was kind of ___ all the time. You know, my first husband, I shouldn't say it but I never was able to talk to nobody, the only guy that I could talk to was him and my parents, and that made me kind of a _____ you call that? So it was pretty hard to get along with the people...

DP: Do you find that there were any draw backs that if you lived in the woods and then you came into the white man's society there were any things that you didn't know how to do or fit into?

EW: No, I kind of learned pretty fast that anything I done, I learn to make baskets ___ because I wanted to feed the kids and that was my first idea when we came out, and to most of the people, but with my second husband everything was easy, he was a good provider.

DP: What do you think about Indian Reservations?

EW: Well Indian reservations that I see, they make nice houses for the Indians, but they don't give them any land for their property or anything for plants or anything, to grow anything. You have to buy everything. And of course the Indians that live on the reserve will get wee bit of money from the

government whenever they can't work, but the little bit of money is not very much, I can tell you that much because I lived on that reserve.

DP: How was it when you lived on that reserve?

EW: It wasn't great but then I stayed in an old house, cold, and ____ and every time you needed that something to eat you would have to get the ____ they ordered and then you would have to order a meal for ten dollars, maybe five dollars to feed our five kids with that. Something I should have told you before when I was with my first husband, I didn't even think about it. So I lived on the reserve for all ____ and all that time I don't know where my husband was.

DP: Do you think that being on a reservation, living there, do you think it made up for when the white man took away all the Indian's land, was that a big sacrifice that they made?

EW: Well it wasn't that, the way that the white man took their land there at that place, it is a place near Goldman Lake ____ and it was a ____ anyway ____ was a white man and then Indian agents _____. That is what the,

DP: So the Indian was getting a lower deal.

EW: Yeah, and you see they were supposed to give us some clothes for our kids, and they didn't give me the clothes. And then it's a good thing I had clothes for them before I came there, ____ while I was there my kids had scarlet fever, ____ my cousin she got the doctor to come and she said _____ need better food, the kids or very much of anything. The very reason the Indian put a law ____ the white man...

DP: Do you think Indian Reservations have changed any since then?

EW: Yes, they built more modern house for the Indians and they look after them much better than they did at that time, of course the Indian got whiter since then because the ____ everything in their tribe to take care of them.

DP: Do you think that the Indian's are now fitting into the white man's society or do you find it hard for them to fit in?

EW: Well I think ____ fit it if the white man would try to get along with.

DP: Why is that?

EW: Because they are always against me, and were always, always as far as I am concerned.

DP: Do you have any regrets in your life, if you had anything that you could change in your life yourself you would not do again or you would do again?

EW: One thing I would do if I had the chance to change I wouldn't have married my first husband.

DP: Where do you think Indians are headed for the future?

EW: Well my sister is one of the, pretty much like white men to the book because they are all fighting to get the rights and everything like that, I think it is only...

DP: Is there anything, if you had the power, right now, if you had the power to do anything as far as change anything for the Indian, and you could have this power, what would it be?

EW: That we would have the same equal as white man. We would have the same thing as a white man. I think unions shouldn't be _____ pay for their license for hunting, like they used to never have to have a license now they can even turn around they got to have license to fish, trap or hunt.

DP: Thank you very much Elena White, and this concludes my interview with Elena White and Leo White.