

AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
of
Irene Boisvert
(nee Seyfried)

Born October 19th, 1935



Prepared for Sociology 345:
Women And Work In Canada
Athabasca University

Assignment 1 - Topic B:
Oral History Interview with a Woman
About her paid and unpaid labour prior to 1970

Submitted by Maxine Boisvert

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Oral History Interview With A Woman: Irene Boisvert

This is mainly an account of my mother, Irene Mary Theresa Boisvert (nee Seyfried), born to Hazel (nee Adam) and Lawrence (aka Sonny) Seyfried, on October 19, 1935. It's a story in celebration of Irene's life as a workingwoman, and the names of her people are for real. Mom pays us tribute to her mother's laborious efforts too in sharing her own personal experiences. Irene and Hazel are amongst those unsung women heroes who shaped O'Canada! And rightfully so, I'm obliged to exemplify their history as part of this assignment for *Sociology 345: Women and Work in Canada*.

Irene was raised in a mixed farming community in northern Alberta—25 miles northwest of Athabasca. It was because of crop failures and droughts in the south that her Saskatchewan parents decided to forge towards Peace River in the beginning! Like the others, they were leaving their barren prairie existence behind—rarely if ever returning to their roots or seeing their loved ones again. Across southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, the local tabloids rang loud with promises, which mom quotes her parents saying the papers were calling “a land of milk and honey” in farming! Lured by the ads, all sorts of people from the south made the expedition north in hopes of going beyond their dust back home. That's where young Sonny and his southern buddies were going—to search out the paradise in Peace country. But their optimism dissipated just north of Athabasca, near Fish Creek, when the trail got awfully muddy. Rain pulverized around them for weeks, and it wasn't long before the wheels on Sonny's old Ford Model-A came to a soggy halt! Yes, he and his enterprising partners had reached their journey's end. It was Grosmont—not Peace River where they were destined to homestead! That was in 1929.

Mom thinks that her dad, his friends and younger brother went back and forth from Grosmont to Saskatchewan hauling stuff before they finally brought their women to the homesteads. They must have used the car and their horses and wagons, but mom's pretty sure, from the stories she's heard, that the bigger things were shipped out by train: things like their tractor, a seed drill, and

grandma's cook stove. She says there was livestock sent west too, which meant that either granddad or another guy must have ridden the train to feed and clean after the animals. In 1934, shortly before mom was born, Sonny and Hazel went back south and stayed for the better part of a year, but they didn't give up their homestead. Mom figures that her dad's father was sick in Bengough and he asked Sonny to come and help him with farming. Granddad's sister Bernice lived in Medicine Hat where my mom was born. Aunt Bern had apparently insisted that her brother Sonny and sister-in-law Hazel stay with her and her husband until after Irene was born to be near a doctor. It was a good thing because Hazel had major complications in her delivery! Sonny took brief employment in a brick factory until he was able to repatriate his new family home to Grosmont. Years later when Sonny would confide in Joe, his son-in-law, he would vent his frustrations for having to return south that year. He complained how he lost a whole year on his homestead—and after that he refused to return south ever again—even with Hazel's encouragement!

There were times when Hazel still wished she were a town girl. Although she adapted well to the bush, and mom says that she could do most everything expected of a good farmwoman, sometimes she lamented for town. Her younger sister lived in town and made her own money as a hotel matron—that was Aunt Mary—married to granddad's brother, Uncle Let (Lester). Aunt Mary wore stylish clothes, and she was independent out of necessity. Her and Uncle Let eventually divorced because he drank too heavily. She tried to raise their son Tom by herself, but she ended up with a nervous breakdown. The doctors in those days had given her shock treatments, which she blamed for her seizures in later life. Aunt Mary had ran away from home at sixteen, and she came out to homestead with Uncle Let against her mother (my great grandma Adam's) and sister Hazel's wishes. So, Sonny and Hazel basically raised mom's cousin, Tom, too. Tom was the same age and blood as Irene. Even though they were close as kids, they grew distant as teenagers and even more when Irene married Joe who disapproved of Tom's laziness and dependency on Sonny and Hazel.

Amongst the earliest recollection of her parent's working lives, Irene catches flashes of the lumber camp/sawmill days when her dad was a mill worker and her mother was a relentless cook

being run off her feet. Mom proudly says that grandma Seyfried was, in fact, “the cook” in one particular camp, as she recounts how efficient her mother was at serving so many men. Irene says that her mom was up at 4:00 in the morning to set the bread in the cookhouse where the family got to stay because she was the cook! A picture that mom still cherishes is one of herself standing next to her mother in front of that very same cook shack. Another childhood glimmer is of being five years old and full of anticipation in waiting to open a humungous box of men’s work clothes that arrived at camp. Irene remembers the overwhelming feeling of excitement in knowing that her mother had placed a part of that order—a new pair of boots for guess whom?

Farming, as mom describes it, was more like a return to the farm between camp scenes every spring for the first several year’s of her life. That’s when granddad would do his seeding and they would buy up some farm animals. Interestingly enough, the camp was only a few short miles from the homestead, yet in those years it was impractical to commute back and forth the distance. It was easier just to close-up shack and stay in camp and check in periodically until spring. “Speaking of lumbering,” Irene says, “I remember a large moose that was shot at the camp to feed the men. Being as there was no refrigeration, the moose was propped onto wooden sawhorses, in an old barn, and the men would cut off roasts for my mother to cook.”

Before that, her dad was into a bit of commercial fishing, at a nearby lake, with his brother Let. They peddled as far as Morinville. My Granddad Seyfried was also a trapper. As a teenager, mom can remember him leaving for the trapline and telling her mom, “don’t send anyone looking for me until two weeks have passed.” He mainly trapped beavers and weasels. Once he had almost \$1,000 in a tobacco can from trapping. It was the most money that mom ever remembers her parents having in the house. That reminds mom how often there was no money—and nobody dare ask for anything or else!

Grandma Seyfried home-schooled mom in grade one because there was no district school, and for grade two she was bussed to a neighbouring community. Finally by grade three the new ^{Lawrence Lake} ~~Ranch~~ (Ranch)

School was built near home, and granddad was appointed as a local school trustee. Mom recalls an event when her parents had no money for school supplies and tomorrow was her first day back to school. It was nothing short of a miracle when an unfamiliar man came along that day to buy up a few sheaves of grain. Irene stayed on at ~~Ranch~~ ^{Lovett's Lake} until she finished grade nine at fourteen. During high school, Irene boarded in town until she finished grade twelve at Athabasca High School.

Irene's working life was influenced by religion. In high school, she was active in the Roman Catholic Church and belonged to the Catholic Youth Organization. She took on lead roles in her club as an organizer.

"I was a teenage musician, of a sort, organizing songs and dances. I also travelled with the church youth plays. I did stay, being a Roman Catholic, at the local academy in grade ten—it was a watered down type of convent life that provided lodging for all types of Roman Catholic women. Athabasca was unique because ordinarily academies were situated in the larger areas. It probably wouldn't have been an option to stay there if I was of another religion. At university, I stayed at a Catholic Women's boarding institution. Mother found my accommodations for U of A through her local church."

Hazel had wanted to be a teacher too, but she had to quit school in grade nine because her mother was seriously ill. My poor Grandma was parentified taking care of her eight younger siblings, so naturally she encouraged my mother to establish a career. Mom quotes her mom as telling her "you will end up working in only local cafes probably, if you don't choose a profession that will carry you with better wages." So, at six years old Irene was programmed to become a teacher—it was instilled young she says,

"I stuck with that idea throughout high school. I went to the University of Alberta and I trained to be an elementary teacher, certified for grades one to nine, and I graduated in '54. I did my practice teaching at Spruce Grove and at McDougall Elementary in Edmonton. Then I returned

to Athabasca and took a five-year teaching job—prior to my marriage. You were allowed to go out and teach with very little education providing that you continued to upgrade. The wage of an elementary teacher, after one year of training and a commitment to upgrade, started at a hundred and sixty a month which equalled twenty one hundred a year. I can still remember when I got that first cheque and how I liked my first teaching job at Lahaivelle School near Grosmont.”

In 1958, Irene married Joseph Boisvert, and she took off seven years of teaching from 1959–1966 to have five children. She regrets that she had to go back to work before she was ready to leave her youngest child, but she realizes how fortunate she was to have a good reliable babysitter like her mother who she paid forty dollars a month. Irene compares the community as it was in the ‘60s as being quite different than in her youth when there were lots of people in the area because of the mills. “When the mills left, the people left. Finding a good babysitter around home would have been easier when I was a child.”

It was in 1970 that Irene quit teaching full-time because of so many staffing problems at Smith School. Eventually my dad encouraged her to quit. During her full-time teaching years, teachers were going through a major transition from being strict to the more lenient forms of discipline, which created insurmountable controversy at school!

“I tried to stay neutral” she says, “ but they knew whose side you were on. Another barrier was that I couldn’t drive; otherwise, I could have taught in other places such as the Hutterite Colony or Athabasca, but having no car to call my own was the final deciding factor.”

Mom can’t recall there being any pay inequality between the men and women teachers, as both were paid on the basis of training. Rather, inequality was more apparent in the sense that there were no native teachers or support staff in a native community that had a school population of about seventy-five percent. Remorsefully, Irene comments on the epoch offering that, “one teacher was an ex-nun who taught on reserves, and she probably had lots of insight into the native people’s lifestyle.”

All things considered, Irene doesn't hesitate in saying that her teaching profession was the most satisfying part of her life.

"I think it was the respect, as you do get a fair amount of respect as a teacher. There were things about my profession that made me feel appreciated and good about myself in the community. My mother's mother was married at sixteen and raised a family of nine. My mother was married at eighteen, and she probably had only one child because she was the oldest of nine and had to quit school and bake everyday. I was able to teach for five years before I married. I thought that was the best way to handle my life: to have my own job, my own money, and to spend the way I wanted to."

Housing conditions left much to be desired for most of Irene's life. For years, she coped with inadequate accommodations of no running water, sewage or electricity. In her words it was like this:

"When Joe and I moved out to the farm in '65 there were boxes of appliances that were unable to be used, which I eventually forgot until the kids would drag them out. I was used to not having utilities, heating with diesel fuel, and packing water in and out. I was forty-three years old when I first had running water. Even at the teacherages there was no running water—power but no water, and there were even outdoor toilets in town well into the early 50's. Laundry was difficult with my family of seven, so I washed at the Laundromat in town. I've often said that I've paid for several of those Laundromat machines over the years! And when I was young, and at home with mom, laundry was done on a washboard in a metal wash tub, and you would have to heat the water on the stove and then put your tub on a couple of chairs on the floor in the kitchen. Then you would scrub your knuckles off on a glass washboard, and then hang them on an outdoor line. Bathing was done in the same tub used to do the laundry. Each family member bathed once a week."

Regarding a decline in cash from farm production, Irene says that her mother was affected more than she was because her mom relied on cream and egg sales every week. Grandma would stand at the end of the driveway and flag down the Greyhound bus to ship her produce, and she would arrange for my mom to pick up the cheque as her allowance in high school. The creamery was a “boon” in the community then. They passed out cheques or people could exchange money for poultry and such. Irene says that her mother was definitely affected when it switched over to a quota system.

As far as a decline in farm production affecting Irene, ^{she} ~~her~~ and Joe didn't depend on farm income that much because Joe was so diversified. When my Granddad and Grandma were on the farm there were milk cows, and for a short while after that, but dad clearly didn't care for farming even though he grew up on a farm.

For extra cash, Joe and Irene played old-time music, which eventually became a family band around the late 60's and early 70's when three of their kids learned to play instruments. Irene says their music put food on the table for the week. The band, Joe Boisvert And The Old-timers—as ironic as it was called considering the young people in it—remained popular around Athabasca for about 20 years straight while the dance hall scene was in effect. Joe and Irene hired different musicians over the years, but their young entertainers were star attractions. Mom explains,

“It was quite an undertaking preparing for those dances. I remember rushing supper, dressing young musicians, and sometimes playing two-nighters on the weekend. I would start preparing dance clothing on Thursday's after school. Then after a late night of playing, we would come back to a cold house at all hours in the early morning with young kids. The dance halls were usually drafty and a lot of them were just heated with wood, and they had no indoor facilities either! Sometimes it took half the night before you felt warm enough to play your instrument properly. Prior to the 1970s we were able to earn a fairly stable and dependable income from

playing old-time music, which would be impossible today. Nowadays, I prefer to volunteer my music and give back to the community for its support in helping me raise my family over a twenty-year span.”

On October 25, 2003—Irene was married to Joe for forty-five years! She openly admits that Joe is old fashioned; nevertheless, she feels he has always been supportive in the sense that he gave her the option to work outside the home and garden if she chose to. He never expected her to work outdoors on the farm like some men expected of their wives. She prides Joe in being a very diversified person and a survivor, and even though his only immediate support towards the home was in repairs, she accepts her husband’s lack of domestic support. Irene sums Joe up as being typical of his time. Her reaction seems somewhat indifferent towards inequality in their relationship. First, Irene is clear that she wouldn’t want to be liberated to the extent of having to change tires, and secondly she finds it was normal and therefore easy to accept Joe’s ways because her “sister-in-laws and friends were all in the same boat.”

Mom makes clear that her work story is not one of hard times and bitterness if that’s what my oral assignment was looking for? Instead, Irene feels good about her life, which she suspects might not make for a very interesting report! Quite contrarily, my mother’s life up until 1970 illuminates what the readings for this assignment depict on the history of workingwomen in Canada! Although Irene is a unique woman, it’s the very essence of her ordinariness that makes her such a classic.



Irene's parents – around 1930-32 – Lawrence (a.k.a. Sonny) on far left and Hazel Seyfried on right holding 50 muskrat pelts.



Hazel and Irene next to the cook shack where Hazel worked – the family's seasonal residence in early years.



Logging with horses – Sonny on far right



Irene as a young musician



1954 – Irene's first teaching job

Summary: Oral History Interview With A Woman

Overall, the oral history interview with my mother went well. I enjoyed learning more about her! We both were relatively organized and relaxed. I travelled forty kilometres out to my parent's, so that I could meet with mom in the comforts of her own home. I provided lunch, and before the interview we warmed-up by chatting for a few minutes off-the-record and briefing an overview I had prepared with my questions. I was clear about my ethical responsibilities in terms of anonymity, confidentiality, and her right to refuse any questions. We thought that the interview went smoothly: our voices were clear and mom's responses were focused. I regret lacking the time to listen through the whole recording with mom before having to leave. Mom's feeling was that my questions were appropriately directed towards the objective of the assignment, and I will be providing her a copy of the interview cassette, notes, and my report. Mom wanted her name included, and as for her relatives she left it at my discretion, so my most major concern is in revealing their names. I probably should have investigated the appropriate protocol in their regard prior to my submission.

Questions: Oral History Interview With A Woman

1. Can you tell me about your background—such as where you grew up, your family, and how they lived when Canada was primarily a farming, fishing, lumbering, and fur trading economy?
2. Can you tell me about the paid work you have done throughout your life, starting with your first job?
3. Was your work influenced by religion or war?
4. Were men and women treated and paid equally at work—was it an issue where you worked?
5. What about the work you have done at home? What were your living conditions like in terms of water, sewage, appliances, and work travel? What can you tell me about that starting from the time you were a young adult?
6. How did you manage child-care?
7. What has been the most satisfying work you have done during your life? What made it so satisfying?
8. Were you affected by the transition from family to industrial farming in Canada in the sense of losing any form of cash income from home production?
9. Did you feel supported by your husband in terms of housecleaning, cooking, or child-care?