

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

Irene Boisvert recording 2003.mp3

http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/i_boisvert.htm

Narrator: Irene Boisvert
Interviewer: Maxine Boisvert
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[Start of interview]

Maxine This is Maxine Boisvert, I am interviewing Irene Boisvert, my mother, for assignment one in Sociology 345: Women and Work in Canada. We will be discussing my mother's history in regard to her paid and unpaid work prior to 1970. I will start with question number one and Irene will take over from there.

Maxine Question 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? Go ahead.

Irene I grew up in basically a mixed-farming community here in northern Alberta. My parents had come to the area in approximately 1929 from a farming/ranching community in southern Saskatchewan. They left that area primarily because of crop failures. There had been syndicated ads in their local southern Saskatchewan papers which called, or conned, them to come to this area, actually it was farther north to the Peace River district. Which they actually indicated said, "The land of milk and honey for a better farming life."

Irene They got to the Athabasca area and could not leave it due to, as they put it, two weeks of solid rain. Roads were not the roads we have today, of course. Very, very poor conditions; lots of mud. And of course, the vehicles they had then were, in comparison to our vehicles today, much to be desired. So, they decided to settle in this area.

Irene My early memories of my parents form of work was actually not the farming bit but lumbering. They worked in lumber camps. One in particular I remember when I was about the age of five—my father worked in the mill and my mother was the cook in this particular camp. I remember her getting up at 4:00 in the morning to set the bread. I remember living in a log cook shack of which I have pictures of today with my mother in her cook's apron. I remember her feeding the men, of which my father was one.

Irene I remember how I got my winter clothing. I was not yet in school. She ordered my winter boots. We used snowsuits at that time, usually a two piece. She ordered it along with the camp clothes. The boss, as they called them then, would take the order for the camp clothing for the men and ask my mother if she needed any clothing for me and she would order my needs, along with probably some for my father. And I can remember one time a huge box coming with all the camp clothing, which was very intriguing for a five-year-old. And I remember getting high winter boots, felt winter boots, of which I have a picture. I thought they were great of course. I remember my mother having to stay up late at night to contend with

bedbugs in the log cook shack; having to kill them. As you know, bedbugs love old log buildings, and besides her long work day, she spent her nights trying to get rid of pests.

Irene The farming was probably a return to the farm that I would remember between the camp seasons, where my parents would return to their little farm in the area, probably more or less in the spring. And do their seeding, buy a few animals, of this nature.

Irene Getting back to the lumbering form of work in regard to my parents, I also remember a large moose that was shot for the camp to feed the men. I remember it being in an old barn. There was no refrigeration in those days, and it was propped up on wooden props, sawhorses, you might call them. And men would go out and cut a roast off for my mother. It was frozen solid. And of course, as a five-year-old, it looked huge, propped up on these wooden sawhorses so to speak.

Irene I also remember the fact that, probably before my father went into working for this mill, he also did a bit of commercial fishing on a lake in the area, along with a brother who peddled the fish, I believe in the Morinville area. My father and this one brother also went into a lumbering business on their own, but I was much older at that time. My father also did a fair bit of trapping. I think I was more or less a teenager at that time. I remember him going from home to his trapline for a period of as long as two weeks with his horse. He would tell my mother, don't come looking for me until two weeks have passed. That is, I'll be okay. He trapped beaver, mainly, and I remember him coming home and fleshing them. That term was used by trappers to indicate that they must remove the heavy fat, or lard you might call it, from the beaver pelts and hang them up to dry. There were also weasel traps. And I remember my father having close to a \$1,000 in a tobacco can. That was probably the most money I remember my family having in the house at one time.

Irene The thought of my father gaining a \$1,000 through his trapping brings me back to the thought of having no money in our home when I was in my early stages of schooling. I went to a ... well, first of all, my mother home schooled me for a year in grade 1 when there was no community school in the district here. For grade 2, I was sent to a school north of us for one year until our local school was built. My father was one of the trustees on the local school board. But I recall a particular year, having no money at all for school supplies and I had to go to school the next day. And in those days, you had to buy your supplies at the school. You didn't go into town generally to shop for school supplies. And there was not a penny in the house, and we wondered how I was going to be able to buy my supplies the next day. Luckily, by the grace of God, a neighbor came along and bought just a few bundles, or sheaves you might call them, of a particular type of grain of my dad's; probably oat bundles. And I luckily, or lo and behold you might say, got my school supplies. I attended my local school from grades 3 to 9. From my local school I went to Athabasca High School, at age 14, where I had to board out for the next three years.

Maxine We'll now go on to question number 2: Can you tell me about the paid work you have done throughout your life, starting with your first job?

Irene My mother had wanted to be a teacher, but she had to quit her formal schooling in grade 9 because her mother was seriously ill. So, probably she instilled in me the thought of being a teacher. Being an only child, I was encouraged to choose a profession of a sort. As my mother put it, you will end up working in only local cafes, probably, if you don't choose a profession that will carry you through with the better wages, so to speak; serious job so to speak. So, I recall saying at about six years old that I would like to be a teacher; wanted to give it a try. And I stuck with that right through high school and on into the University of Alberta, where I chose to train as an elementary school teacher.

Irene After receiving my certification in elementary school education grades 1 to 9, I did my practice teaching in Spruce Grove, a little bedroom community, you might say now, of Edmonton, Alberta, and also at McDougall Elementary in the city of Edmonton. From there I went back to my own County of Athabasca and took a five-year teaching job in that county prior to my marriage. I mainly taught in two schools during that period of time.

Irene I'd like to make a comment on the wages of an elementary school teacher of my station at that time. I only had the one year of university training. You were allowed to go out and teach at that time with very little university education, providing you continued to, you might say, upgrade. I recall my first monthly cheque to be approximately \$160 a month. And my total yearly wage was in the vicinity of \$2,100. We could stretch our cheques over 12 months or we could receive them just monthly for the ten months we taught. If we wished to have our wages continue over the summer holidays of July and August, then we got smaller cheques throughout the year. So, it was a choice of the teacher of that time.

Irene I took seven years off to raise my family from my teaching positions.

Maxine And what years were those, Irene?

Irene I married in 1959 and so I didn't go back teaching until the lapse of the seven years. [So, 1966.] Right, my last child was born in '65, which is my interviewer, and I started back teaching in 1966.

Maxine And you had how many children?

Irene Five in a period of seven years. I regret going back to teaching in 1966 for Maxine, the interviewer's sake. I felt that I should have spent at least that year home alone with her as I had to have her babysat for the period of time that I was teaching after she was born. But I did have a good, reliable babysitter which was my mother. I paid my mother for babysitting Maxine. I even paid her through the summer holidays to make sure that I had her for the following year. Good babysitters are hard to find. An interesting comment might be made on the amount I paid my mother for babysitting. If I'm recollecting correctly, it was approximately \$40 a month.

Irene I quit teaching full time in my last school due to staff problems. I suppose you might say it was the transition from a more stricter form of discipline to the more lenient form of discipline. There were staff issues to which I felt I didn't want to be involved in, so I resigned from teaching full time and remained at home. I went into

part-time teaching until about two years ago. My part-time teaching involved the Athabasca Elementary School, but mainly the local Hutterite colony in my area.

Maxine Did the fact that you had five children at home weigh as a factor as for your reasons in quitting, or were there issues—you were taking, in your time, that you only required a year of certification? Would there come a time where you were expected to upgrade and with five children, were any of those barriers?

Irene I think the main barrier was that I did not at that time have a driver's license. I could have driven to the local Hutterite colony and applied for a full-time job there, or I could have driven to Athabasca Elementary School. But having no driver's license and lack of funds to probably buy a car that was just mine alone was a deciding factor also.

Maxine Question 3: Was your career influenced by religion or World War II?

Irene I would say more by religion than World War II, but I will make a comment on World War II also.

Maxine And how so was it affected by religion?

Irene When I went to high school, I attended the local Roman Catholic Church and I belonged to what was known as the Catholic Youth Organization, the CYO club; whatever you want to call it, as I helped with entertainment. I was a teenage musician of a sort. I helped with other young Roman Catholics to entertain at evenings of, you might say, song and dance. And I also traveled with the church youth plays. We would go from community to community in the area with these various plays. And I'm not sure whether there was a fee for these plays or not. If there was, the money no doubt went back to our Catholic youth group fund or possibly would help sustain the church in some way. I'm not too clear, my recollection of that is no longer there. But I did stay, being a Roman Catholic, at the local academy when I first entered Athabasca High School, that would be in grade 10.

Irene The academy in that era was a watered-down type of convent life which you would find maybe in the larger areas. For example, my husband originated from the French community in Morinville, and they had the convent life there and, at one time, he went to the convent school. Well, this was a watered-down type of that sort of lodging for Catholic youth.

Maxine So what you're saying is, had you been Protestant or of another religious affiliation, you wouldn't have been able to stay there?

Irene Probably not at that time, I wouldn't say for sure. I know the Anglican Church had their type of lodging for seniors at that time; it was under the auspices of the Anglican Church. They just had what would be a rooming house with a matron to look after them. I don't know if they had a girls. I know they had a boys. And we had both the academy for boys and girls. They were separate buildings. We were on one side of town and the boys were on the other side of town. In fact, the boys were quite adjacent to the church.

Maxine How about when you attended university? Was there any support from the church at that time, the Roman Catholic Church?

Irene No support locally. All that happened there, I did stay in a, when I went to university, it was called a Catholic women's boarding institution of some kind. That took all forms of Catholic working women, high school students and university students like myself.

Maxine So, in that sense, they played a major role as far as accommodation.

Irene Yes, I would say that. My mother and father, well, my mother mainly I think, found the accommodation for my university lodging through the local priest here, I think. Or the sisters, the nuns at that time, recommended that area in the city when I finished high school here.

Maxine Moving on to the latter part of the question, the influence of World War II ...

Irene I was influenced a bit by World War II in that my mother had two brothers in the Canadian Armed Forces, in training. One was stationed in, I think it was Victoria, B.C., and one was stationed in Manitoba. And I believe the place was called Camp Shilo. I'm not sure. Maybe it was Brandon, Manitoba. I'm not sure of the exact area. But the one that was stationed in British Columbia did not see active service at all because of medical reasons. His vision got him to be released.

Maxine So how did that, in essence, affect you from an economical view?

Irene Well, my uncle who was in training in Manitoba was shortly to go over, in 1944–45 just prior to the war ending. But due to the war ending he didn't go over. But economically, the only effect it had on my family was that my mother sent cigarettes to my uncle on a regular basis. I remember her buying mainly tobacco, I would say, by the can and us forwarding it to the military training base in Manitoba. But she said, in her own words I would quote, that she was happy that the war had ended because he would have died from the trauma of just being there. He was from southern Saskatchewan, her hometown.

Maxine Okay, are we ready to move on to Question 4?

Irene Okay.

Maxine Question 4: Were men and women treated and paid equally at work. Was it an issue where you worked?

Irene I would say at my time of my teaching years, there was no difference in the equality of pay at all. You were paid on the basis of your training. So, that didn't worry me. If there were teachers more qualified than me, naturally, including the principal, of course, they would be receiving much better or higher salaries than me, as I only had the one year of training. I received increments in wages through years of experience.

Maxine And that scale was equal for men and women?

Irene Yes, very definitely, yes.

Irene Speaking of inequality, I would like to cross over to the representation of teachers to students, the ratio there. There would be inequality there, I would say, in that approximately 75 percent of my students would have had Native blood in their veins. And there were no, that I can recall, Aboriginal teachers of any sort in the classrooms of the time. I recall one teacher on my last full-time teaching position, or in that time, had a long connection, I think with ah ... She was ex nun, and I think she probably taught on reserves. So, I think she came to us from a reserve to the last school I was teaching in. And I think that she probably had a lot of insight into the Native people's lifestyle.

Maxine How about in the support positions within the school, in the administration functions within the clerical, within the custodians, was there any Aboriginal representation at all in those areas?

Irene I would say probably not; only in that there might have been a bit of Aboriginal blood in the veins of some of those people, but I can't say that there was any identifiable Aboriginal, even in the custodian field.

Maxine Thank you. Moving on to question 5: Let's talk about the work you did at home; the unpaid labor. Can you tell me about starting from the time you were a young adult? And can you also talk about your living conditions in terms of water, sewage, appliances? And work travel, we discussed work travel. If you can enlarge on those other areas.

Irene Our housing had much to be desired. I would say, on the farm as a child, even when my husband and I moved to the farm here, which is my original home place; we took over from my parents when they retired and moved into town. Very, very poor housing, basically. No running water or sewage for years. I remember when we, well, my parents didn't have any of that at all, not even the electricity, till my husband and I moved to the farm. They were still here, my parents. I can remember myself moving from town, having boxes of appliances and not even any longer thinking of them. I recall one day one of the children bringing out a waffle iron when we finally got power. And it was amazing to even remember, or just see that I had one. But, I was used to none of these utilities in my youth. It was all either, well basically wood heat accompanied in time by fuel oils like diesel stoves or furnaces of that time. And what water you packed in, you packed out, as far as sewage.

Irene I was, I'd be 43 years old when I first had running water of my own making. Well, of my husband's making it, too. Even in the teacherages that I lived in, in the two communities that I taught full time, I never had running water. We had power in those teacherages, but no sewage facilities, outdoor washrooms. Even when I went to, going back a bit, to Athabasca High School, there were some outdoor toilet facilities for a time. Of course, that was beginning in the late '40s, early '50s.

Maxine That must have been a quite challenging in organizing and preparing your laundry and such?

Irene Especially when I had a family of seven to wash for in my married, early married life. I had to take washing to a laundromat in Athabasca for I'd say probably five years; carted in there and carted back out again.

Maxine Which is fairly labor intensive.

Irene Right.

Irene Speaking of laundry, I'd like to mention, too, that at about age 10 to 12, I recall helping my mother with her wash. It was, of course, all hand done on a washboard in a metal washtub. 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 and scrub your knuckles off on a glass washboard for clothing. And then, of course, hang on outdoor clotheslines, which I enjoy; hanging outdoors, especially in the summer, to this day.

Maxine What about bathing and hygiene?

Irene That was also done in probably the same large tub that was used to do the laundry. And you probably took a bath—there was no such a thing as a shower in those days—probably once a week. Each family member on their own.

Maxine How did you manage childcare?

Irene As previously mentioned, I employed my mother to babysit for me. I probably could not have gone back to teaching for another five years full time if it hadn't been for her availability. There were no longer a lot of neighbors in the area. The community, when my husband and I moved out here to the farm, was not what it used to be in my youth. In my youth, believe it or not, there were a lot of neighbors you might say, because of the mill business. There was more milling, lumber milling in here, than farming at that time, although my parents chose to do a bit of each to survive. You could have probably gotten a neighbor lady to babysit then. But when the mills left the area, some of them probably moving farther north, some not doing it at all anymore due to aging of the men no doubt. So you probably would have done better having someone to take care of a child then, than at the time that I moved back to the farm.

Maxine So, the demographics of the community population decreased when the milling shut down?

Irene Right.

Maxine Question 7: What has been the most satisfying work you have done during your life and what made it so satisfying?

Irene Well, I will have to say it was the teaching, my teaching profession. I enjoyed it very much. It wasn't totally the money as the money wasn't that great in that day although, it probably compared to the cost of living as it does now. And there are things about the communities that I worked in that I found that I was well appreciated. I seemingly got along with the parents and the students; basically, had

no problems with them. Except as I had mentioned I quit my full-time teaching due to staff problems that I was not involved with, basically. But I think they decided what side I probably would have been on if I ever had to make a choice. I think I've indicated what made it satisfying is that I think it made me feel good about myself. There's something in teaching that satisfying, I felt. I think it's maybe the respect that you get because you do get a certain amount of respect.

Maxine Respect as a woman that maybe the women in your mother's generation didn't receive?

Irene Yes, my mother's mother was married at 16 and she raised a family of nine. And I feel that was something that she probably, in that era, could never have gone beyond or climbed out of that situation; she never could have climbed out of it, to use words as such. My mother was married at 18 and probably had only the one child, myself, due to the fact that she was the oldest child out of a family of nine. She indicated that she had to bake a cake every day, for school the next day, coming from a prairie town with little money. Although she lived in town as well as in the country.

Maxine I'm wondering did you have a certain type of independence you felt, that women in unpaid work didn't experience?

Irene Yes, and I was able to teach five years before I married. I sort of felt that that was the best way to handle my life, to have my own job, my own money, to spend the way I wanted before I would be influenced or affected by husband or family.

Maxine Question number 8: Were you affected by the transition from family to industrial farming in Canada? And did you receive any form of cash from home production and eventually experience its decline? If so, how did that affect you?

Irene I think that it affected my mother probably, on my parents' side, more than it affected me. My mother depended on her cream cheques, her egg sales when I was in high school to help support me there. I remember her shipping these farm commodities in by local bus. It would pick them up if she took them to the road. And she would tell me what day they would probably be in town as I was boarding in town, as previously mentioned, to go to high school. She would tell me what days they would probably be at what was called the local creamery then. The local creamery in Athabasca no longer exists. It was a boon to the community then. You could go in there and buy farmer's eggs, cream, cheese. At Christmas time they would have turkeys that you could go and pick out there of your choice. And they would pass out the cheques to the people who just took cash. Some exchanged their own farm products for somebody else's products. So, it was definitely an effect on my mother when they went into the quota system for shipping farm produce.

Irene But as far as it affecting me, when I moved back to the farm, it did not because we didn't depend on it that much. We did milk cows for a time and used the milk for the family. We did ship a bit of a cream, but my husband was quite diversified, and we didn't depend on farm produce as such. I was involved in our family band, which was a local old-time music orchestra, which involved three of my five children and my husband and I. And we were able to buy the groceries you might say after every

weekend, or the beginning of the following week after playing on the weekend for local dances. There were many of them; many local weddings that we played for, anniversaries and so on. So, I was not affected in the same way as, say, my mother would have been.

Maxine So, what you're saying is you weren't so much affected by the decline in agricultural income, but was there a decline in the entertainment business as it related to the culture of Athabasca over time? You talk about playing for dances. Did that decline over time? That was a means of home income.

Irene Definitely, there's been, I would say there's been an absolute decline in that. Now it's more of ah, you play for no funding, it's more a volunteer thing. Yes. And I say any of the volunteering I do in the form of entertainment, I wish to give back to the community because they definitely did hire me and my family members for a number of years. I would say, I played in the family band for a period of 15 to 20 years.

Maxine Why did the local entertainment, old-time music type of entertainment decline in Athabasca? What caused that?

Irene It's an era of its own. I think it's probably going to be gone in the not too distant future. People of my age relate to old-time and country music. The youth of the time now are into a different form, I think, of entertainment. Probably more into sports, and their music, of course, is the music of the times and the music of the times is not the music of the past. Yes and no; we do have, of course, the Old Time Fiddling Contest.

Maxine And income from home production, you were going to discuss the fact that you had played for dances, you and dad, for a number of years, and how that generated a form of paid income. Can you enlarge on that for me?

Irene Well, it was about a 15-, 20-year spread there of definite income in our field, being musicians of a sort. There's been a decided decline in the community in that respect due to urbanization now. Yes, we did generate income through that form of entertainment. But we've gone now from the old school house to better community halls. Some of the old school houses have had additions built on them, which then did further accommodate more area for these local dances. Then we've gone to the bigger community centers in our towns. But now, even we see there is nothing in the bigger centers to amount to anything in regard to these musical entertainments. We do see, probably, at local fairs during the year, in the fall, maybe rodeos in the spring, that they do have odd bands come in and entertain. And shall I say there aren't that many marriages anymore? Marriages, back in the early '70s to the early '80s were a thing. Everybody seemingly got married at one time or the other, whether they stuck together or not. But now, it's more of the common-law relationships and I'm not putting this down, but I'm saying we see this as a change in society.

Maxine So, prior to the 1970s, you were able to earn a fairly stable, dependable income from playing old-time music, which would be impossible to accomplish today.

Irene Correct.

Maxine Speaking of playing for dances as a form of paid income, can you discuss some of the challenges as far as preparing for dances, coming home from dances; in accommodations which were inadequate, heated with wood; preparing clothing for the dances with inadequate facilities as far as consuming your time and energy?

Irene Yes, it was quite an undertaking. I can recall teaching all day, say, on a Friday, coming home that evening, preparing a rushed supper, seeing that three young musicians dressed for a dance, plus my husband and myself. That would have to be all done over again probably the next night, because sometimes we played a two-nighter, which would be a Friday and a Saturday. And probably I would have had to prepare those clothes Thursday night if we played Friday because I was in school Saturday. Ah, excuse me, Friday. And, yes, we didn't have that great of facilities in the home at that time until probably into 10 years of playing, say. The last 10 years were probably better as far as facilities to accommodate the family and being prepared to go out.

Maxine So, coming home to a cold home was common. As well as some of the halls that you played in had inadequate facilities as well?

Irene Very definitely. It might have taken you to half the night before you felt that you were warm enough to play your instrument properly. Properly, according to your own terms.

Maxine Question 9: Did you feel supported in regards to your unpaid work at home, i.e., housework, cooking, childcare? Was your husband supportive?

Irene I would say, and this might surprise you as he came from the patriarchal group. I label him in that group. Yes, I do say I was supported in that I could quit working at any time. Even when I was teaching. I couldn't quit working at home, of course, because I had the childcare to contend with, the domestic work which he never did get involved in. But I have been told by him, from time to time, that any time I saw fit that I didn't want to work out of the home, I could quit tomorrow. Even in my gardening efforts, if I didn't want the garden, just quit it. He is a very diversified person (although he's retired now) he was very diversified at that time and he came from a large family and he was, I would say, a survivor.

Maxine As far as helping you with housework, cooking, childcare in the home, were you supported in that respect?

Irene Ah, supported in that he helped with those projects?

Maxine Right. Not necessarily in a financial context, but in the context of actually providing labour in those areas and contributing his efforts and energy?

Irene Only if it was a repair of something in the home. And I contented myself in that I was never asked to work outdoors. Never.

Maxine So, are you saying that it was acceptable to you that he didn't help with housework, that he didn't help with cooking or cleaning or childcare? Was that the norm and you were accepting of that? Or did you resist that?

Irene No, I think I accepted that because that was probably the same position that most of my sisters-in-law were in, friends of mine, women friends of mine were in. Although there are deviations, there are men of that era that definitely did help, I would imagine, in the home. But I repeat again, it did not bother me to put it in those terms as I was never asked to go milk the cows, work in the fields, work with any of the animals. So, I suppose I was content with just my housework and my gardening and my yard.

[End of interview]

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