Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
Transcription of Alma Swan recording 2016.mp3
http://digiport.athabascau.ca/aasmp/people/a_swan.htm

Narrator: Alma Swan
Interviewer: Mark Boersma
May 17, 2016

[Start of Interview]

Mark Today is May 17th. I'm Mark Boersma and I am talking to Alma Swan at Edwin Parr School. So, if you could answer just a few questions for us that would be wonderful. First question we have is, how long have you been living in the area?

Alma We moved here, that I remember, when I was nine years old. I moved away several times and then the last time I moved back home was in 1993.

Mark And who are your parents?

Alma My mother and father are Mary Anne and Clarence Swan. My father is deceased.

Mark Your mom's still alive?

Alma My mother is still alive and she's been at Extendicare for three years now.

Mark In Athabasca here?

Alma In Athabasca.

Mark Is there anything you would like to tell us about your childhood?

Alma I had a very interesting childhood. I was born in Calling Lake, Alberta, and my father worked in a lumber camp. It was owned by Slim Ellefson. At that time, the families lived there and the fathers worked there. I was born on January 28 of 1957 during a snowstorm. And because it was a snowstorm, travel wasn't as easy. So, my mother went into labor and my father delivered me. The nurse came probably four or five days later and made sure that I was okay.

Alma I was named after the nurse in the area. Her name was Alma. She was a nurse in the Calling Lake area for many years. There was several other children that were named after her.

Alma Other bits of my childhood, when I was, I think, probably about four years old, we went through a house fire. There was my youngest brother, Phil, my brother Bill, myself, and Victor. We were home from school because we weren't old enough to go to school. When we lived in Otter Creek, which is in Smith, and I'm not sure at what point we moved from Calling Lake to Smith, my mom went down to the creek to get some water. It was the middle of winter and somehow the stovepipe caught on fire. So, us little kids and the house was burning. We ran out of the house in bare feet.

And my mom was a big woman. She was strong as a bull because at that time she used to help my dad who was an avid hunter and a trapper. She used to go out in the bush with him to bring the moose out of the bush. And she was able to carry a quarter of a moose out of the bush. And she used to walk. We used to live probably 10, 20 kilometers out of Smith and she used to walk that distance.

Alma So when she came back to the house, my brother was in the back bedroom. He was a baby. My mother probably was at the most five feet tall. So, somehow, she got into the window, tore the window frame off and got my brother out of the house. And then he was in the hospital and she was in the hospital. I think she broke her arm getting my brother out. So, my brother was in the hospital for some time for smoke inhalation.

Alma So then, again, when I was in Grade 3, we had another house fire. It totally destroyed our house. This time, what happened was, at that time, you had those washing machines that required some kind of a gas. And so, we had, like, when you come in the door, there was our wood stove and my brother Phil. He wasn't going to school yet, but he was trying to be helpful. And he was bringing, my mother just said she needed gas for the washing machine. So, he went out and got it, and these come in those glass containers. And so, as he was coming in, he banged the stove. [Oh.] So, he had rubber boots on. He burnt his legs very badly. And my brother Emery burned his hands; got third degree burns on his hands, trying to put out fire and on his rubber boots. So, and then again, my mom broke her arm because she went out the window, which was by the washing machine, and she broke her arm because we had a rock bed outside that window. So, she got a broken arm. My two brothers ended up in the hospital for burns. My brother Phil was in the hospital probably for five or six months because he had to learn to walk again because the back of his legs were burned so badly.

Mark Right.

Alma And then the same year 'cause that was in the spring, in that same year, my brother Emery would have been, I believe I was 11, no, I was 9 at the time. And I think my brother was 14 or 15, and this was in May, him and his best friend. We lived right by, we call it Ollie's Pond, which is about 14 feet deep. We always used to go swimming there. And, we had these car hoods, for rafts. And so, my dad was in Edmonton helping build the CN tower at that time and my mom never left us. So she decided to go and visit my dad in Edmonton. And my sister was 17, and very capable of looking after us because we come from a family of 14.

Alma So, and they went, and I was, I was watching them because they were going to go on their raft before we went to church. And so they went on their car hoods. My brother's best friend was Gabriel Beaver, and they were on their raft. And then Gabriel had epilepsy. So he had a seizure and his raft started going down. And then when he came out of a seizure, then he jumped on my brother's raft and then it started to sink. And my brother had just got his leg out of a cast because he had broken his leg or did something to his leg. So there, so they both started to panic and then they both, their rafts went under and then they went under. And so, they both actually ended up drowning. And my brother Raymond and my brother Lee were both very, very strong swimmers. And so, they swam up and down and everything else to try and save them. And all of my brothers were very, very fast runners. Like, my brother Leo competed nationally and won a full scholarship to university. So one of them ran to town and got Leonard LaFrance. And I can't remember who else came. And they came with fishing boats and whatever gear that they used to bring drowned bodies out of the water. So, they came and I don't know how long it took them, but I just remember as a nine-year-old child, them fishing bodies, bodies out of the lake.

Alma So that was kind of, and so in that year, we had the house fire and then we had my brother that drowned. And then so, in the middle of June, my dad decided it was too difficult for us in Smith. So, we went to Edmonton for a month. All of us kids, we went to Edmonton for a month because my dad thought, well, we'll live in Edmonton. My uncle Jonas had a huge garage. So, between the garage and the house, we all stayed there for a month. And Dad, well, this isn't going to work either.

Mark Well, there was like 12 of you then, right? [Yeah.] Yeah.

Alma So, I don't know if there'd be 12 of us. I can't remember how many of us there were. So that would have been. No, because I think two my siblings were born after that. I can't remember.

Mark Around 10 maybe, eh?

Alma No, because there was only my sister; my youngest sister was born in 1967. So, I think she was the only one that wasn't born yet. But anyway, we stayed in Edmonton for a month, then we came to Athabasca. And then, like, it was, we didn't know what to do. And we, I mean, us kids, we just never thought anything of it. We just were along for the ride. So, but anyway, backtracking. Yeah, and when we went, when we lived in Smith, there used to be a picnic every year in Fawcett Lake. And they'd have all kinds of games; we had a picnic, everything. And all the years that we used to go to Fawcett Lake, there was, my dad was a very fast runner. And, they used to have races and nobody could ever beat my dad in racing. And I guess that's where my brothers get their speed from. And because I think at least four of my brothers were runners. Like, for track meets and Leo was the only one that, well, competed nationally and before he'd go to school, he would run to Colinton and back, that was part of his training.

Alma So, and his boys also are runners because he's got three boys. And, I think when the youngest one was about six, they did the 10K Walk for Diabetes. So, I mean, very fit, and we were always very active sports wise. And if we were inside in the summers, we had to get to work. So we played baseball with my parents. We'd go tobogganing, we'd play every game possible. And because it was so many of us, we used to play baseball. When we lived in Athabasca, we'd play with the Bennetts a lot because they had a family of 14. So, we always had enough for a team. And then we'd play lots of flag football. And part of the challenges, we lived next to a farmer's field, and part of that challenge was when we did play in the farmer's field, was to miss the cowpies as your . . .

Alma So that was kind of. And what else?

Mark Local hazards, [laughter].

Alma Yeah. And we were always very, I mean, recreation and physical activity was part of our life. And, so when we ended up back in Smith, we had no place to live. So, we stayed in the hotel for a while. And then this sounds really strange and wacky, nut when I was nine, a friend of ours, his name was Victor Paquette, he had some friends of his that, they came to Athabasca to visit. And then, Victor learned that we were all staying in the hotel and whatever. So, somehow in the midst of this, four of us went to live in Edmonton with this family of Ronald and Leslie Berard. I ended up staying there for two years and my siblings, there was a couple of them that stayed for that period of time but I can't remember for how long or whatever. I went to school for two years in Edmonton.

Alma And then, I came back when I was 11 and we lived in Athabasca. Ah. I just remember, like, my mom had several operations for gallstones, and it was kind of neat when my mom was in the hospital, then dad used to have a station wagon and we'd all go out in the evening. And my, you know, some of my favorite memories were going out hunting for prairie chickens. I don't know how we all fit in this little station wagon, but we did. And even one of my favorite memories, we went and I would have been, I think about 13. Dad had an old International truck. So, if I was 13, that would have been in 1970. I don't know, '57; about, '70?

Alma Well, we all, had an aunt and uncle that lived in Fort McMurray. So mom and dad decided we were going to go, I guess, on a vacation and go visit them. So we all piled in the back of the truck, lots of blankets, and at that time the highway was still gravel. So there was my sister and her two kids and all of us. And nobody wanted to sit in the front seat because it was too much fun in the back. It probably took us at least four hours to get there, but we had such a blast. And then we went to, I can't remember the festival that's in Fort McMurray that, you know, different races, different entertainment, and greased-pig catch or whatever you call that. I think it was the Blueberry Festival; I think that's what it's called in Fort. But we had a blast and we stayed there for at least a week, went fishing. And so, that was one of our, I don't know, I consider one of very fond memories of when I was a child.

Alma I went to school at Edwin Parr. I went to Landing Trail for one year when I come back from Edmonton and then went to Edwin Parr. And my last year at Edwin Parr was 1975, which was kind of neat that I've come back, come back here. Ah, what else. For a couple years of my high school I worked at the Union Hotel for George Skagos. George was really good to me. He was at the Union Hotel at that time and there was a ballroom downstairs and during my work with George Skagos, we got to serve fancy banquets in the ballroom downstairs of the Union Hotel. And I never, ever found it to be haunted as per popular perception. But yeah, there was lots of staff parties down there.

Alma And I you know, and I served during those staff parties and banquets. And then I moved to Edmonton, and I worked as a personal care aide for 17 years. And I very much enjoyed it. I, at that time was when the special care units were being open for people with Alzheimer's disease. So it was really interesting too; did lots of training at Alberta Hospital and different things to learn how to set up these units. And so that's what I did, probably when I worked as a personal care aide, for the last few years that I did that I worked in Alzheimer's units. And in 1979, I had a son. He's now 37. I have two grandchildren, one's my step-grandson, and I've had them for five years in my care. My son has had three near-death experiences. My niece, who I consider my daughter, came to live with me when she was 11 years old. She came to visit me for a weekend and she never went home.

Alma So I always tell her whenever she says she's coming to visit, I always, we always tease and ask her how long she's coming to visit this time. So she's my daughter. Those are the only grandkids I have.

Alma My daughter is a journeyman scaffolder and she's going to finish her third-year welding this winter. [Good for her.] My son is a carpenter. He lives in Edmonton and we see him very regularly. He comes and helps me out with my two grandkids who are 8 and 11. And when I was in my 40s, I went back to university, went and got my social work diploma. I worked for Aspen View School Division, probably for at least 16 years. I've had the opportunity to do some very exciting work.

Alma One of the jobs that I had was, for four years I worked for Elizabeth Fry Society. And what Elizabeth Fry Society does, they work with women that, incarcerated women, and provide supports and resources to women that are incarcerated. And do some human rights advocacy. I was honored to be part of a human rights submission that they did to the federal government about human rights violations that are happening to women across the country and in federal prisons. So that was, I think, about a 500-page document that I was a part of. I always went, in my job, I was the prison visitation worker. And what that means is, I'd go to the Remand Centre twice a week and provide services to women. And part of those services were, they're in the Remand Centre awaiting trial.

Alma So, for a lot of women, it's their first time in prison. So, they're waiting. I'm here. Now what do I do? So, helping them get bail, making phone calls to lawyers, and whatever else. And helping to prepare for trial. Helping them with reintegration back into the community. Fort Saskatchewan was part of that, and attending parole hearings. And, like, if you're on a provincial sentence, you also can get parole. So, you get early release for even a provincial sentence.

Alma When I was working at the Edmonton Institution for Women, that also was doing prison-rights advocacy. I always say my claim to fame is I've been in prisons from one end of the country to the other because of being the Prairie regional advocate. Then, we'd go to other prisons and kind of look at what are similar issues and concerns in prisons across the country for women. And also understanding the reasons why, like, the common factors for why women go to prison: poverty, addiction, abuse. Those are the three factors and, you know, trying to, you know, address some of those issues. And also, Aboriginal women are incarcerated 65% more than non-Aboriginal women and even they're sentenced harsher by 35% more than men; Aboriginal women are. And even I was involved in a . . . See, I'm not even sure whether or not if it's still available, is if you got a life sentence, after you serve 15 years, then you can go for a judiciary review. And so, basically it's a trial. And to see whether or not you'll be eligible to apply for parole so you don't have to serve your full.

And I was involved in one of, it was quite a high-profile case out of Wetaskiwin. And that woman and three other men, they killed somebody and the woman got a life sentence. Her partner got 10 years. One of the fellows got 7 and one got 5. So that, for me was a prime indication of how women are sentenced. Because society perceives women as being the caregivers and they're not supposed to be capable of murdering somebody. And just, it was probably, I did that for four years and it was probably the best job I ever had in my life because I learned so much from women and understanding that anybody can end up in prison.

Mark Yeah, there's so much inequity.

Alma Based on fact, you know, different factors in their life. And also, at some point when I was working during the federal visits, 25% of the women that were incarcerated there were middle-class women, non-Aboriginal women. It was a lot of fraud-related charges, trafficking, and they weren't violent crimes. But that whole economic piece of why are women [in for] fraud. And a lot of it was based on mental health issues. And the whole, we used to have a program called Stop Lifting. And what that program was about was, why do women shoplift? And it's usually about, like, if they're going through a divorce, or difficulty in their relationships. So, to fill that void, then they shoplift. I mean, in the $1,000s and even, like, some of the best fraud artists are women. Because it's that rush they get from fraud and how much they can get away with. And I mean, one of the best fraud artists was, she was, I don't even know if she was 20 years old. I mean, over $1,000,000.

Alma You know, I'm just thinking like, and I used to ask, like, what did you do with all the money? Well, my friends would go on trips all over the world, and buy stuff, and got into drugs, and just like a whole bunch of different factors and, of course, mental health issues. So, that was, it was probably the most interesting job that I had. I've worked for the school division, I've left and came back, I think four times. And I think part of it is, is because we don't make a whole lot of money working for the school division. But the rewards in how you can make a difference in children's lives surpass the financial aspect of working for the school division because my role is providing services for Aboriginal students.

Alma And recently, the big, you know, the majority of the work is education on the history of Canada as it pertains to residential schools. And that whole you know, we call it general. I mean, we call it genocide of Aboriginal people. We're very fortunate that our federal government is now looking at . . . It was, it was an abominable history of Canada, but so how do we move forward? And part of that is number one, acknowledging that it happened and doing whatever we can to make things right. And making things right doesn't mean giving people a whole lot of money because that has no, at the end of the day, it has minimal effect. It's about how do we do that healing? And part of that, I think, in my experience, that healing comes from all of us working together. And it's not about us and them. It's about how do we move forward as a country and being kind to everybody and saying that everybody, every child matters.

Alma And also honoring the treaties. I know there's still lots of people that think, well, they get everything for free. You know, I talk about First Nations people. We don't get everything for free. We don't, we all pay taxes. So in the whole perceptions of, you know, First Nations, we don't get a free ride. And I don't care what anybody says, there were treaties that were signed and they weren't signed in the best interests of Aboriginal people. At that time, it was about resources that people that lived on. So, the government wanted those resources. So, how do we get them? And most of the time it was gotten because of the lack of understanding and because they could.

Alma And so, part of that, when you talk about First Nations, I'm a member of the Bigstone Band, but I just recently became a member of the Bigstone Band because it was a Supreme Court ruling called the Gender Equity Ruling. And it was something to do with . . . Let me backtrack, because I believe was 1985, there was Bill C-31 and that's how women regained their status. And because back in the day, if you married, if my mother married, my grandmother married somebody that was non-native, and that was Pierre St. Sauveur, who was a Frenchman. She lost her status as a result. But when men married a non-status woman, their women, this non-Aboriginal woman gained status. But Aboriginal women lost their status and my grandmother lost her status and my mother married a non-native. So, she also lost her status, or she couldn't regain her status. And then in 1985, there was a Supreme Court ruling called Bill C-31. So based on that Bill-31, my grandmother regained her status and then mom gained her status. So, they're reinstated two generations of status there. So, we couldn't get status. But now with this gender-equity ruling, that's how I regained my status. I think that gender-equity ruling came probably about four years ago. So, I have status and I'm a member of the Bigstone Cree Nation. And my son has status, but he's had status as a result of Bill C-31. So, now because of him regaining his status and me regaining my status, then my granddaughter will be eligible to have status. So, it's very convoluted and I don't understand a whole lot of the time. And also, I guess, for me is, with this whole Métis and everybody having status. I mean, I think it's, when I've talked to other Métis people and status people, it's a very convoluted as what does that really mean? And sometimes it's a way of the government watering down what status means or whatever? So I'm very interested to find out, like at the end of the day what all of that will mean.

Mark Because it will define them?

Alma Yeah. And how do you define . . . You know and, part of this is my perception and I don't know if it's reality but, for awhile, Métis people gain, had the opportunity to hunt and fish anytime they wanted. What happened was, a lot of Métis people didn't have the experience or knowledge of how to preserve Mother Earth or the animals or anything like that. So a lot of Métis people just went out and shot as many moose or deer as they want. Not because they needed to, but just because they could. So, you know, there's still lots of people that hunt and fish for sustenance and subsistence. So, how was that going to play itself out? I don't know. And, you know what? Time will tell. And I think in order for us to. And I'm very passionate about, you know, how do we move forward and how do we honor Mother Earth because the forest fires in Fort McMurray, are prime example of how we how we're destroying our country. Ah, no, not even our country, our world.

Alma And our beliefs and values as an Aboriginal person is you have to protect Mother Earth because if you don't protect Mother Earth, then she doesn't provide for us as human beings. And then you have to protect the animals because we all have to live together in harmony. That's what I was taught by the elders. And I really value elders' teachings and I use every opportunity to learn more. And like, I know so little about the elders' teachings and about plants, and how years back, when people lived off the land, people weren't sick because they had all of the medicinal plants too, for healing and just the different ceremonies. And I really have a world of respect for ceremonies and the value of land-based learning. And I hope as a country that we go back to land-based learning. Because we have to do something because what we're doing isn't working and it's not preserving our land.

Mark Mm hmm.

Alma So I don't know. I'm probably going all over the place.

Mark Nope! It's all good. So, are we ready for a question?

Alma Sure.

Mark Okay. How did you meet your husband?

Alma I don't have a husband, but I met my son's father as a kid. He used to chum with my brother all the time. So that's how, and he's deceased now for about a year and a half. [I'm sorry.] He got quite sick and him and I haven't been together for probably, at least, probably close to 30 years. It wasn't a healthy relationship. So, I was a single parent for probably about 8 years. I was very fortunate in the sense that even though we weren't together anymore, then we were still very amicable. And, you know, we tried to do what was in the best interest of my son.

Mark What was a typical mealtime time like?

Alma Growing up as a kid, growing up mealtime? I mean, it was very, very important. We all had to sit at the table together as a family and everybody. Growing up, it was always the women's responsibility to clean the house. Like, do the inside chores and it was the boys' responsibility to haul wood and haul water and do kind of the hard work. But because there was so many of us and my mom worked all the time, then I would say out of 14 of us, 12 of us are very good cooks. And my brothers enjoyed cooking and were good cooks because we all like to try different things.

Alma And one of my very fond memories of growing up was when we lived in Athabasca here, we lived in this house across Tawatinaw Creek and we'd go down the hill from EPC, we'd go down the hill across the old Colinton Road and through the bush to our place. We'd go up the hill, it was on, George and Bertha [Clark] has this property and we always lived close to the creek to go swimming. And so in the winter, of course, the creek was frozen. So we'd walk across in the winter and then in the summer we'd have to wait. We had to walk all the way around, which is at least, oh, easily three to four kilometers to walk to school. [Wow.] We kind of sort of got the opportunity to ride a bus. But we didn't, growing up. The bus that used to go down the old Colinton Road, it wasn't a bus, it was the station wagon.

Alma And that station wagon didn't, of course, we couldn't ride the station wagon because it was already full. So, we really didn't, weren't offered bus service. So, I think back in that day also, it was how we as Aboriginal children were treated less than. [Yes, you were.] And because of the racism back then, we preferred not to ride the bus anyway. And because we were so athletic, I mean, walking four kilometers was, bah, was nothing. And because we dressed for it also. So if we walked across like back of the EPC Hill, it was probably about two kilometers, but we walked around almost three to four kilometers because we'd walk down the tracks. And then the first street on East Hill was where we'd come out. And we lived not very far from the clay pit, the famous Athabasca, there's clay pits in the east of Athabasca. So, it'd be southeast of the East Hill.

Alma But anyway, going back to when we used to come home from school, there was a back door, then there was a front door. My mom had a show that she used to watch every day when she came home from work. I can't remember what it was, but we'd come in the back door and my mom used to make bread twice a week and of course, made probably about six dozen, at least six dozen buns. And I don't know how many loaves of bread. As we come in the door, she said don't touch the bread. And I don't know why she said that for years, because we all always knew we'd always get a fresh bun before supper. So I have her bread recipe that she used to use and whenever I make that recipe, probably about 50% of the time, it's as good as my mom's, but I have to make sure and tell my brothers and whatever I'm making bread tomorrow. So, expect some bread tomorrow because it makes so much bread.

Alma And every Sunday, we talk about mealtimes, every Sunday was a big meal and she'd always baked pies or cookies or something. But not sitting together at the table was not an option. And we actually had a oak table that actually fit all of us. And it was given to us by a fellow by the name of Villeneuve. And I'm not sure when we got it, but I remember like all the time we lived in Athabasca, we had this huge, almost like a big table as the last supper. My brother . . .

Mark But you didn't eat at the table?

Alma Oh, yes, we had to. Oh yeah. We always, we were not, we're weren't allowed to eat in the living room, sitting in front of the TV. And even in the summer we weren't allowed to sit in front of the TV and like, during the day, and watch TV. And I think I remember we didn't even watch TV before seven o'clock in the evening. It was always, we were always playing outside, because if you're in the house, you got put to work. And I remember the first year we got a TV, it was during the Olympics in Germany, and that was when we got to watch TV whenever we wanted to. Because, I mean, the Olympics at that time were such a huge thing. And because we were so athletic, we were very interested in watching the Olympics.

Alma I don't know what year that would have been. I would have been, probably mid '70s. So, but we always, I mean all of us, we used to go swimming except me, I'm the only one in my family that doesn't know how to swim. And part of the reason I don't know how to swim is because of watching my brother drown. And because . . . we were horsing around and I can't remember how old I was, but my brothers didn't believe me, that I didn’t know how to swim. So, they'd throw me the water way out in the lake. Then I'd bob a few times and then they'd say "Oh, she doesn't know how to swim." And that's brothers.

Mark And they'd go gettcha.

Alma Yeah, but I mean, that was just part of growing up. But even growing up. [That's pretty scary.] Yeah, even growing up, we weren't allowed; I mean, my father was very adamant—we do not fight with each other. You don't fight with family. So, I mean, if we were having a squabble, we made sure that dad didn't know. [Right.] Because to him, family was everything. [Yeah.] So, I mean. [Strong bonds.] Yeah. And even, I mean, we squabble even to this day. But when something happens in our family affairs, like, for instance, when my dad died, we all come together. And I mean, even now we still have our squabbles, but when something happens, we're almost all together as a family because we've had our share of squabbles.

Alma So to this day, I have my brother that drowned when I was nine, and then one of my brothers died very shortly after he found out. I had a brother that had difficulty looking after himself. So, he lived with my mom after my dad died. So, he lived with my mom because it was around the time that him and his wife split up. So, my mom looked after him. He was the oldest sibling and, uh, and then he died of a variety of reasons that would take too long to get into. He found out on Friday that my mom wasn't going home. So, then he'd have to, he'd have to find someplace to live on his own. So he died within a couple of days of that.

Alma Then my brother, my second oldest brother died just recently in December. He had cancer and he long surpassed how long he should survive because, I mean, he was a very, very hard worker and just wasn't going to give up. So, I mean, they gave him something like three weeks. I mean, he lasted just about a year because he had stage three of three-stage melanoma or something.

Mark Not skin cancer?

Alma No, it's a type of I think it's a type of blood; I think it's a type of leukemia. Leukemia, I think. [Okay.] And at the end stage, like, he had lots of pain, but at the end stage he had some tumors on his brain. I mean, the upside is it blocked his pain receptors so he had no pain. But then the paranoia. Well, so he couldn't leave the hospital just because of the level of paranoia. And he thought people were trying to kill him and whatever else. So, it was kind of six and a half dozen the other. Yeah, you're not in extreme agony anymore, but you're in agony emotionally or psychologically.

Mark You are still in agony.

Alma Yep. Just a different type of pain. [That's right.]

Alma And then my mom, three years ago this July, I believe it was because I lose track of time, she went into the hospital. Her bile duct was plugged with gallstones. And? What else? And she had three abscesses on her liver. So they never thought she'd survive that. So she was in the hospital till December.

Alma She went into the nursing home a couple times. The doctors were, you know, doctor thought that she would, you know, she was just too ill. And she was; she'd been diagnosed for palliative care for over a year. She was in bed probably for about a month, wasn't eating and wasn't getting up or anything else, so, finally, we were called at 11:30 that night because they didn't think she was going to make it through the night. So I had a conversation with her about going to be with my dad. And then, so she sat up in bed, said, "Well, no!" I said, well, then you need to get out of bed. So she's been up, you know.

Mark And she's up and around now. Good for you.

Alma The doctor has said he just doesn't understand how she's still alive. She's very, very social. And you can't get her to have a nap. And she's 85 now. Can't get her to have a nap in the afternoon because she might miss something. But she was always very social, even growing up, I know I'd go ask her, "Mom, do you want to go with me?" And before I'd even say to where? Oh yeah. Like she always wanted to go anywhere or everywhere and just extreme. Very, very social.

Alma She worked for the Commissionaire for probably about 35 years. You know, being a guard for the RCMP and then also she volunteered unofficially at the courthouse for probably over 20 years as an interpreter for Cree. She did that for over 20 years. And always she was on the Board for the Friendship Center for many years. She was one of the organizers for starting the Métis local in Athabasca many years ago. So, she was very active and I think sometimes I'm like her as far as volunteering because I've been on the Friendship Center board probably for 20 years. I was on the Teen Center board for at least 10 years. And now I don't volunteer as much just because when you're left by yourself and having a 7-, or 8-, and 11-year-old that are busy with dance and gymnastics, they keep me hopping.

Mark My daughter is in dance, too.

Alma Oh, they had a beautiful; we just finished our year end.

Mark I went there. I saw they did a nice job.

Alma Oh, it was a beautiful, it was just such an enjoyable event to go to. So many talented young people. I'm trying to get my grandson to join tap, because one of the things my mom used to do, she used to compete in the Red River jig. When you think she was a very big woman and they had a competition down at the riverfront one time and I had two young fellows standing behind me and they were commenting how light on her feet she was. And because of her size and they kept talking. Then they started talking about how big; her arms were like stovepipes. And I said, "Before, you say anything that might be disrespectful," I said, "That's my mother." And then they were you know, I don't know if they would have said anything. But she could do the Red River jig like nobody's business. So, one of my wishes is one of my grandkids to learn the Red River jig because none of my mom's grandkids know how to do the Red River jig. And my granddaughter's in tap. So I'm hoping this summer, I think I got somebody that will teach them. So my mother would be just so happy if somebody carried on that tradition.

Alma So I don't know, I've had an interesting life in the sense that I've been very fortunate that I have lots of family, and family that, you know, is a very caring family, but it's not been without its struggles. I mean, just with being a single parent for lots of the time and, you know, trying to support kids on my own. Even just as an

Aboriginal woman, the struggles of Aboriginal women and, you know, the years of racism. And how do you value yourself when society as a whole doesn't value Aboriginal women, and women? So, I mean you have that kind of double-edged sword. But you know, I made out. When I was very young, I made a very conscientious decision because, I'm 59 years old, but I've never been drunk in my life. I never did drugs. Never been a smoker. So, I think my decision was to break those stereotypes of Aboriginal women and also the perception or the just stereotype of Aboriginal women having multiple partners and stuff like that, you know. Trying to break those stereotypes and trying to be a role model for my kids and for the community. I try and hopefully I am successful at that. So, I've always been very invested in the community and making a better place in our community and, you know, in the school and trying to make a difference in children's lives here at the school. I tried and one of the things I really been trying hard is to teach young children about the history of Canada as it pertains to residential schools because they're very, very interested in learning about the history of Canada.

Alma And that's where it starts. And we did this tile project at Whispering Hills, and it was how I started the tile; it's called Project of Heart. And I did it with every class at Whispering Hills. And I read them a book about this child, five-year-old child preparing for residential schools and that whole, "What is residential schools? And how does it look to a five-year-old?" Then teaching them how we can move forward as a country and how it wasn't a part of Canada we're proud of, but how we're all in this together. And then after that, we paint these little tiles that are about an inch and a half by an inch. And you draw a picture on the tile how you think that we're in this together. And what some of the pictures that are drawn on the tiles were: love, pictures of family, pictures of mountains. Just children's ideas of how we should love each other and how we can, you know, change how we are together in this country. And, what we'd like to do or what our goal is; we're going to use all of those tiles and make up a work of art.

Alma And one of the parts of, one of the huge contributions of Aboriginal people in Athabasca, is the scows and how they used to transport freight up and down the river. And Captain Shot was actually my great, great grandfather. And he was the first man to shoot the Athabasca Rapids. Because he used to transport freight up and down the river but it took too long to go all the way around and whatever. So, he decided he would do something different so he secured as cargo on the scow and then he went down the Athabasca Rapids. So, actually, how that came to be is, I mean, how he became my great, great grandfather is my grandmother was 15; she had one child. And I can't remember because I have a book that she wrote, but she met Joe Shott, who is a son of Captain Shot, and she talked him into taking her up to Fort Chip. She said she had family up there, which in fact she didn't. But then, when she was up there, she had my dad in Fort Chip and she would have been only 15 years old at the time. So then, on the way back from Smith, because of her age and stuff, then she knew that she couldn't look after him, so she left with a family, with the Swan family, they legally adopted him. So, that's how I have the name Swan.

Alma And my grandmother was Louise Brown, and she was the first non-Aboriginal woman in Fort Chip way back over 100 years ago. So, I mean, very neat family history. And this summer we're having a Louison Fosseneauve reunion, which is Captain Shot. And some of my family still have the name Fosseneauve. I'm not sure how to say it because it's a French name. And just yesterday my cousins put a headstone; it's not really a headstone, but a huge rock from one of my cousin's property. And so then a little plaque talking about Captain Shot. So they just placed that yesterday. On the July long weekend we're going to have Fosseneauve reunion in Athabasca at the Multiplex. For all of us as a family to meet and see who we're related to and kind of to celebrate Captain Shot. So that's what we're doing. Uh, my grandmother was a very resourceful person in the sense she had a very hard life because she was also, her mother was a single mother and they lived in a rooming house on Jasper Avenue. And because my grandmother was so hungry, she stole a chocolate bar one day and her mother was jailed because she said she was neglecting her child by my grandmother. So, my grandmother became an orphan for a while. So, she lived by herself in the city of Edmonton for a while.

Alma I can't remember what year that would have been, but just the differences of what, you know, how women were treated. And just I mean, a woman trying to, you know, support her child by herself because she was a young mother, too, like my great grandmother.

Mark That sounds like there is a sort of a double strike against you if you're Aboriginal and a woman.

Alma Yeah, but see, I don't know. See, my grandmother was married, I mean, was born in Joplin, Missouri. And, to our knowledge, she wasn't Aboriginal. But I mean, she didn't know; one day I'll do some more searching for her family history. So, even if it was hard for my dad to get his pension because I helped him, had to do a lot of research in order to get his, number one, his birth certificate. And he was in the army. So I think we eventually got his army papers somehow. But I mean, even just that for him to get his pension. And he never, ever learned to read or write because he went to work when he was 12 years old. So, but I mean, my dad was such a hard worker. I mean, work ethic and family were two of the things that he taught us. Like, even the boys, like when you'd get in at our house in the morning, growing up, I mean, if the boys weren't fully dressed with their socks on and everything he would get, you know. They'd only do it a couple times because my dad would say, when you get up in the morning, then you're ready to go to work. You can't go to work with no socks on.

Mark Laid down the law.

Alma Like I was telling my grandchildren at the supper table last night that we never, ever, we didn't fight as kids. And when my dad would whistle, you could hear a pin drop. Like I said, my dad never, ever disciplined me. We just knew that was the rule.

Mark And didn't want to disappoint him, probably.

Alma Yeah, so it's interesting growing up, we had our struggles. We were very fortunate as a family because statistically Aboriginal families grew up in abuse and alcoholism. We didn't. So, I don't know, we were just, we were an anomaly, I think. But I mean, we were very fortunate, and I think it was because of my dad's work ethic and his strong family values. And what else? I don't know.

Mark It sounds like a really positive environment. Yeah, the only other question I have on this for you is if you have any advice that you'd like to give your grandchildren or future generations, that's a tough one to drop on you.

Alma But I think it's just; as a woman; the message that I can't . . .

Mark I'm sorry to interrupt, but do you think things are getting better?

Alma In some ways, but in some ways, we're going backwards for women and part of that's because of society and media is the self-respect among women. Because the whole issue right now is the sexting and sending pictures, you know, naked pictures and all of that. What I try and teach women is if you don't have self-respect, then nobody else is going to respect you. What I'd like to see women is, depending on where you put your, what's the word, standards. If you have the standard, if you have a low standard, that's what you're going to get for a partner. And the higher standard that you have, that's what people are going to meet. I can't stress that enough, is, put your standard, exceed the standard where you want people to meet, because then if they, you know, you'll get better . . . I'm not articulating it very well. But you need to have a high standard of expectations of how you want people to treat you because people treat you how you allow them to. [Right.] For my granddaughter, that's what I can't stress to her enough, is make people treat you with respect and with my grandson, is you have to treat people with respect, especially women. And don't allow women to treat you with disrespect either. Because it's double, in our society, we think it's okay for women to abuse men. No, it's not okay. You need to treat everybody with respect. And it's not okay for women to beat on men. I don't care what's happened in the past. It doesn't make it okay. [Right.] When I think of the increase in family violence because of addiction and stress and all of that, then I'm trying to teach my grandkids that you have to go that extra mile and say it's not okay. When you see it happening, then be a voice for that person. And if you don't feel comfortable intervening, then you need to tell somebody. So that's why I tried to stress to my grandkids and to future generations is just respect.

[End of Interview]

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