

Baptiste family reconnects with their heritage



By Jenn Watt

At 79 years old, Eleanor Yateman Baptiste is getting a new name

The Algonquin woman with ancestry firmly rooted in the Bancroft area, Eleanor is putting her energy into telling her stories and solidifying her connection with her heritage.

"I'm going to get an aboriginal name," she said in an interview with Bancroft This Week. "An elder will sit down with me and give me an aboriginal name."

Eleanor explains that aboriginal heritage was not always spoken about in her family, despite their grounding in the local community.

Due to discrimination against native peoples, members of the family worked harder at assimilating than telling their stories and performing ceremonial rituals.

The Baptistes "for which Baptiste Lake is named" were never classified by the government as Status Indians. They did not live on reserve and they haven't taken government money.

Because members of the family, which Eleanor's daughter Jo-Anne estimates at 450 people, were not concentrated on a reserve, they blended more freely with the surrounding white community. It made it harder to hold on to cultural practices.

"Our family never practices cultural ceremonies," Eleanor says.

Now the family is coming together to research their background further and to write down the experiences that have been passed down orally. Eleanor intends to write a book.

Daughters Marion and Jo-Anne joined Eleanor for the interview with the paper and both said they are thrilled to have their native history recorded.

"Mom made us proud to be native," Marion says, adding some of the traditions were lost over the years before her mother was an adult. But she notes "even when our grandmother [Annie Yateman] was dying, she wouldn't speak of her native ancestry."

Eleanor had five children with her husband Carl Ronald Gould "Marion, Jo-Anne, Ralph, Donna and Carl" who were raised on

Paudash Lake.

Eleanor is the daughter of Joseph and Annie Yateman, granddaughter of Annie Baptiste and Everett Yateman and great-granddaughter of chief John Baptiste and his wife Madeline. (Chief John Baptiste descended from two chiefs before him with the same name.)

Joe is remembered as a peacemaker and ambitious man. He was born at Baptiste Lake and lived in the area until Eleanor was about five years old. Then he and his wife Annie moved to Peterborough where he became a military police officer during the Second World War. The couple ended up having five kids in total.

Joe took engineering courses by correspondence as did Eleanor's uncle Angus, who ran steamboats on Baptiste Lake. Joe took his family south to Toronto. Eleanor went to high school in there, returning to the Bancroft area when she married Ron Gould.

She says though her father didn't have much education, what he did get led to a good position at Goodyear Rubber and Tire, eventually putting him at the head of the union there.

Though he was smart and well-liked, Eleanor still remembers her father encountering discrimination, slurs and setbacks because he was native.

She believes that her father would have been promoted at Goodyear had the men he worked with been open to having an aboriginal supervisor.

Even though the family was in Toronto, they came back to visit Baptiste Lake and Maynooth throughout that time. Eleanor remembers taking the train from Peterborough to Baptiste.

?I used to get sick if I sat backwards,? she laughs.

?Then later, Dad had a car and a cabin at Maynooth and we'd go there every weekend.?

When Eleanor and her husband went back to Paudash Lake to start their family, they hit the reset button on modern technology, living with no electricity, carrying water into the house.

?I had everything in Toronto, [but] there wasn't any transition at all. I was healthy and it worked fine. I even sewed their [the family's] clothes, and carried water up and down two hills.?

They had an outdoor toilet and a wood stove.

That house was on Highway 28. They later moved to a home on Paudash Lake.

At 36, Eleanor went back to school and later moved to northern Alberta to do social work and became a consultant with First Nations communities there.

Now she wants to share her memories and those passed down from her ancestors.

?We need to get the stories now to have them for us and our grandchildren,? Jo-Anne says.