

Tape Transcript

Title: Lydia McKenzie
Media: DAT
Interviewer: John Leclair
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Text

John: I'm interviewing Lydia McKenzie in Stanley Mission. Today is June 12, 2001, and I'm interviewing Lydia McKenzie who lived at Rapid River Post until some time ago. I'd like to ask you some questions about where you came from originally. Where were you born?

Lydia: At Wathaman Lake.

John: Wathaman Lake, that's up by McLennan. And did you grow up in Stanley Mission?

Lydia: No.

John: Where were you raised?

Lydia: I was very small when my parents gave me up to go to school in La Ronge.

John: So you went to residential school in La Ronge? Is that where you learned English?

Lydia: Yes.

John: How many years did you go to school there?

Lydia: Quite a few. I only went up to grade eight. (laughter)

John: What year were you born?

Lydia: 1924, January the 2nd.

John: At Wathaman Lake. And you went to La Ronge until grade eight. And did you come back to Wathaman Lake or Stanley Mission?

Lydia: We came back to Stanley Mission for two months and then we went back to school.

John: And what age were you when you finished school?

Lydia: 18.

John: What did you do then?

Lydia: My parents told me to get married.

John: And you married your husband?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What was his name?

Lydia: Naphthali.

John: McKenzie?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What was your name before you were married?

Lydia: Cook. My father's name was Cornelius Cook.

John: Where was he from?

Lydia: Stanley Mission.

John: Do you remember your grandfather's name?

Lydia: James Cook.

John: And he was from Stanley Mission too?

Lydia: Yes. My mother was Caroline Cook.

John: Your mother, do you remember what her name was before she was married?

Lydia: I think she was a McKenzie. And then my dad died and then he got another husband, a McKenzie. And he treat us like his own.

John: Do you ever remember anybody ever talking about the Cook family coming from Cumberland House?

Lydia: No.

John: Because apparently a long time ago that's where the Cooks came from. My grandmother was a Cook from Cumberland House. How large was your family?

Lydia: My brother died in La Ronge. And there was me and Elizabeth and Bella and Nora and another boy Stanley.

John: The Stanley that's here?

Lydia: Stanley is in Grandmother's Bay.

John: Oh, okay, I know him, I've met him once.

John: Did you have a house at Wathaman Lake?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What kind of house was it, a log house?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did your family own any land there?

Lydia: No.

John: Did they have a trapline there?

Lydia: Yes, they had a trapline.

John: You had no electricity back then?

Lydia: No. (laughter)

John: One of the questions I'd like to ask is what kind of furniture did you have in your house? Did you make your own furniture?

Lydia: Yes, my dad.

John: What kind of things did he make? Beds, tables?

Lydia: Yes, and chairs.

John: And how did he make his living?

Lydia: Trapping.

John: And did he do anything else? Cutting firewood or working for DNR or Company or freighting or anything?

Lydia: No, he hunted moose.

John: Okay, did he hunt for families? Did he share it with others?

Lydia: Yes.

John: When you lived at Wathaman Lake was there a lot of families there?

Lydia: No, there were just two families.

John: What was the other family? What was their name?

Lydia: That was Moses Charles, and Charlotte. But we had neighbours. But that man he knew something was wrong and he came and hunted around.

John: What man was that?

Lydia: They called him Amanikos. I wonder if he had something magic.

John: Maybe. Did your family travel around a lot on the lakes?

Lydia: When we came to Stanley Mission, we used to stand on the hill and watch them glide down the hill at the rapids.

John: At Stanley rapids?

Lydia: Yes.

John: When you went from here to Rapid River how did you go?

Lydia: Sometimes this way (pointing west).

John: Through Four Portages?

Lydia: Yes.

John: And sometimes through Nistowiak?

Lydia: Yes.

John: It's a hard portage though, eh?

Lydia: That's the hard one. We had to haul all the canoes up.

John: Yes, it's a pretty steep hill. Did you have a garden when you were growing up?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What did you grow?

Lydia: Potatoes.

John: Anything else?

Lydia: Those ones that have marrow and warts all over. (laughter)

John: Oh, parsnips?

Lydia: No, potatoes, the long ones. Sakawi Napatakwa.
(bush potatoes).

**Note – Likely wild turnips.*

John: Did you have any animals? Did you have dogs?

Lydia: Yes. Dogs for transportation.

John: How many dogs did your dad run in a team?

Lydia: Not many. But my other uncle, my stepfather he had quite a lot of dogs. He used to put them in that little house where frozen fish were, and the puppies used to eat them.

John: When you came to Stanley Mission did anybody have horses here?

Lydia: One.

John: He did a lot of work I guess, eh?

Lydia: Yes.

John: When you were growing up did you think of yourself as poor compared to other people?

Lydia: Yes.

John: It was hard to get by back then? That was before the war in the 1930s, so it was pretty hard back then?

Lydia: Yes.

John: So you grew your own food, picked berries, hunted, fished?

Lydia: Yes.

John: You said you went to school in La Ronge at the residential school. What kinds of things did you study in school?

Lydia: Mathematics, writing, reading.

John: Were you allowed to speak Cree?

Lydia: No. If somebody was caught speaking Cree we got slapped on the arms with the strap.

John: How did that make you feel when you couldn't speak your language?

Lydia: I didn't want to speak at all! (laughter).

John: When you came to Stanley Mission were there a lot of people playing music here?

Lydia: Yes. My husband used to play for dances.

John: What were the dances like back then?

Lydia: Quite good.

John: Where would they hold the dances?

Lydia: In houses.

John: So how would they do that? Would they move the furniture out?

Lydia: Yes.

John: And have a house party?

Lydia: Yes.

John: I've talked to some people and they would take out the windows sometimes too, because it was just so hot.

Lydia: Yes.

John: Do you remember some of the old dances that they used to do?

Lydia: Yes they used to jig.

John: Drops of Brandy?

Lydia: Yes, square dances.

John: (In Cree) Kiskisin Sisip Asimowin? Do you remember the Duck Dance?

Lydia: Yes.

John: How did they dance that here?

Lydia: I don't remember.

John: How about the Scarf Dance?

Lydia: I heard about it, but I didn't see it.

John: So at home you spoke English or Cree?

Lydia: Cree.

John: Did your parents speak English?

Lydia: No.

John: Do you remember their feelings about you speaking English? How did they feel about sending you to school or were they forced to send you to school?

Lydia: They were forced to send me out to school.

John: When you went to school in La Ronge did you experience any discrimination in the community from the non-Native people?

Lydia: No.

John: Did you know a lot of people from the school?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Oh, you did eh? A lot of people from up north, eh?

Lydia: Yes.

John: So what year did you move to Rapid River, Lydia?

Lydia: When I got married.

John: So that would have been in the forties sometime?

Lydia: Yes.

John: How long did you live there?

Lydia: Quite a while.

John: And what year was it that you moved back here? When your husband got sick, you mentioned?

Lydia: When my husband got sick we used to go to La Ronge and sometimes to Prince Albert.

John: How many people lived at Rapid River when you lived there?

Lydia: There was only Isaac and his mom.

John: Isaac McKenzie?

Lydia: Yes.

John: And his mom?

Lydia: Yes. And there was those guides.

John: Guides? Was there an outfitter there?

Lydia: Yes.

John: There was a little store there?

Lydia: Yes.

John: But that wasn't the Hudson's Bay store?

Lydia: No.

John: Do you remember any stories about the Hudson's Bay store there?

Lydia: At Kenderdine Island. Across from there. When we were making the garden we used to dig up lots of china from there and we used to find the arrowheads. We didn't know how to keep those, and after we didn't know where they were, we must have thrown them away. (laughter)

John: From the river, Waposi Sakahakinihk, to the old post at Kenderdine, how far was that?

Lydia: Not far.

John: Because I think that's what they used to call Rapid River Post where the Hudson's Bay post was.

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did you ever know anybody who used to live there?

Lydia: My brother. And they built their cabin where those graves were.

John: Do you know if any of those graves are still there?

Lydia: I think so.

John: A long time ago there were a lot of families living there that aren't there any more. There was a family called Sinclair. Did you ever hear that name?

Lydia: No.

John: They lived in Stanley Mission a long, long time ago. He was a minister at the church, but that was about 50 years before you were born. There's some records of that. Some of the other families that lived there a long time ago were McLeod and Roberts, a long time ago at the old post where the company was. Do you remember any of those families talking about coming from there?

Lydia: Yes. There was one woman who was so sick who was falling out from her tepee and she saw something in the hole and it was dog piss. And she drank it and it made her well. (laughter)

John: When you were growing up do you remember any of the old people talking about the traditional stories, tapiskooch (like) Wisakichak, or any other stories like that?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Have you told your kids those stories, your grandchildren?

Lydia: No. My grandmother Caroline used to tell stories about Wisakichak.

John: Do you remember those stories?

Lydia: No.

John: Kiyas? (A long time ago)

Lydia: Yes.

John: Do you remember the war at all, the Second World War? Do you remember that going on at all?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did it affect the people up here?

Lydia: Yes. There was some people living at Mountain Lake, and there was a time that they were looking for some light and "the skunk" as they used to call him, that woman was just turning off the light, they thought they were planes from the war. (laughter)

**Note – These people were living up on the Amachewespimawin cliffs above Mountain Lake about a half mile upstream from Stanley Mission.*

John: Before you went to Rapid River did you live across (on the church side, the original settlement at Stanley)?

Lydia: No.

John: So you lived on this side?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Back then there were people living on the big island? McKenzie?

Lydia: Yes. I used to live there with my mother, and grandmother. There was only those houses over there and there was hardly any here. But now it's so crowded here.

John: Yes, it sure is, eh? Do you remember the store across, Sidney Keighley. Did you ever see his book? (Tripper, Trapper, Trader: The Story of a Bay Man) He wrote a book about his experiences. Did you ever see that book?

Lydia: No.

John: He spoke pretty good Cree, though I heard.

Lydia: Yes.

John: Do remember the McLeod (Stanley Hamlet) side when there were Métis on one side and there were treaty people over here?

Lydia: Yes. You know that Keighley? He was my sister-in-law's husband.

John: Oh, really? She was Rachel? (McKenzie)

Lydia: Yes.

John: And there was another sister that married his brother Basil, eh?

Lydia: Maggie.

John: When you were growing up here in Stanley and at Rapid River what did you do for entertainment? Did you travel to a dance?

Lydia: No.

John: But at home you said your husband played fiddle?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did people come to visit quite a bit?

Lydia: Yes, sometimes (unintelligible).

John: Do you remember any of the tunes he used to play?

Lydia: No.

John: So when you lived at Rapid River, there were two families living there? When you fished, and you made fish, you made whitefish and walleye and jackfish? Was there trout there too?

Lydia: Yes. We made the whitefish for ourselves, and the others were for the white men. (laughter)

John: Was there a lot of fish camps back then? Commercial fish camps?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did you make your own hide? (referring to moosehide)

Lydia: Yes.

John: Hard work?

Lydia: Yes.

John: How did you make your hide? Could you tell me how you made it from the time you took it off the moose until it was finished? What was the process?

Lydia: You had to soak it in hot water, so it would be soft enough to take the meat off. And then when we had the meat off we turned it over. Then we would go like this.

John: Scrape it?

Lydia: Yes. And then we took the hair off.

John: Pretty dirty work, eh?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What did you do next?

Lydia: And then we had get some of that brain and spread it all over so that it would be soft.

John: And would you leave it in the sun.

Lydia: And then you had to smoke it first and put it in that tub so it will soak and then we had to get a stick and try to force the water out of it.

John: Okay, like wring it out?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What kind of wood did you smoke it with?

Lydia: You know those alder?

John: Yes, poplar...and just a little bit rotten, eh?

Lydia: Yes. And those cones, dry cones.

Lydia: And then you would wring it out, get all the water out. What would happen next?

Lydia: And then you would fold it when it was dry enough.

John: Did you smoke it again?

Lydia: No. When we had all those things off the hide, the fur and the skin, and then we smoked it. That's from where's it's easy. In the winter. (laughter)

John: When it's frozen?

Lydia: Yes. I used to make four of those little fires and my husband said, "You don't have to do that. Wouldn't it be faster if we put them right in there?" (in the smokehouse) and he ruined them. (laughter)

John: Oh no. So how long did it take to finish a moosehide?

Lydia: Sometimes it took only a few days and sometimes it takes longer to get soft.

John: So what did you make from the moosehide?

Lydia: Moccasins, mitts.

John: Did you do beadwork yourself?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Who taught you to do that?

Lydia: The school.

John: Your experience in the residential school in La Ronge, would you say it was a good experience?

Lydia: Good.

John: You learned to read and write?

Lydia: Yes.

John: What else did they teach you there? Did they teach you cooking and things like that?

Lydia: Sometimes. (laughter) We used to make bread. There was a thing like this...

John: A big oven?

Lydia: Yes. And there were three of those containers where we would knead the bread.

John: So a lot of children from Stanley went to that school?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did you go to the trapline with your father when he travelled in the wintertime with dogs?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did he go a pretty long way?

Lydia: Yes.

John: So he had little cabins on his trapline?

Lydia: Yes.

John: So what did you do in the summertime? It was pretty hot in the cabin, eh? Where did you live?

Lydia: In a tent.

John: What kind of tent did you have?

Lydia: We had a tent on a tepee.

John: How was the tepee made? Was it hide or canvas?

Lydia: Canvas tepee.

John: You lived in the tepee?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Did you come to Stanley Mission for special occasions like Christmas and Easter?

Lydia: Yes.

John: So when you came to Stanley you did a lot of visiting?

Lydia: Yes.

John: So what was New Year's like? Was there a celebration back in the old days?

Lydia: Sliding down the hill. (laughter)

John: Did you go from house to house?

Lydia: Yes.

John: In a lot of communities I've talked to people who said that the older people would go visiting and then the younger people would visit. Did that happen here?

Lydia: Yes.

John: There was a school here at Stanley, here at the same time you went to school in La Ronge. Do you remember why you went to school in La Ronge instead of here?

Lydia: Because they (the parents) never stayed here for very long.

John: Oh, okay.

Lydia: There was a boarding school with lots of kids from here.

John: So the people didn't live in Stanley for long? They just came in for the church but they lived on the land mostly?

Lydia: Yes.

John: Well that's good. That looks like all the information that I need. Is there anything that you'd like to add?

Lydia: No.

John: Well thank you very much for your time, Lydia. I really appreciate it. Kinanaskomitin, ekosi anima.