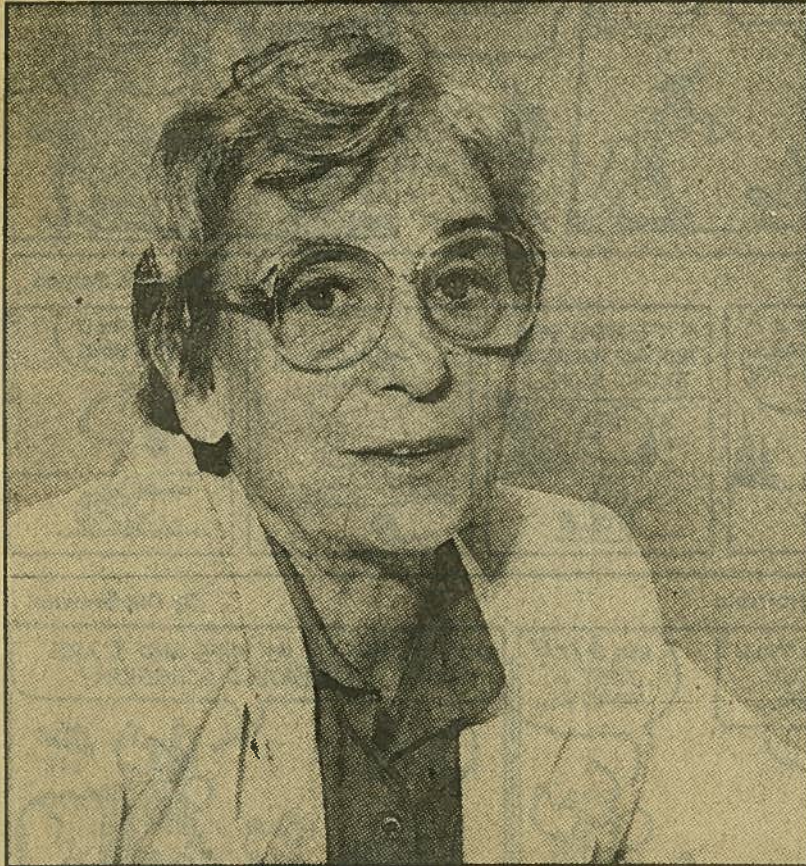


# Former journalist led life of adventure and challenge



Gazette, James Seeley

Olive Dickason a professor with a fascinating history.

By **SUSAN SCHWARTZ**  
of *The Gazette*

University professor and former journalist Olive Patricia Dickason was a single mother and a working woman before it was usual to be either.

But then, it was not usual to be a travelling magazine saleswoman, a resident of a mink farm in the wilds of Manitoba during the Depression of the '30s, well-versed in Aristotle at 17, one of a handful of female students of a renegade priest or a woman journalist in the 1950s, either — and Dickason was all of these as well.

Dickason, 63, lives in Edmonton, where she is associate professor of history at the University of Alberta.

She was in Montreal recently to meet with officials of the National Film Board of Canada, which is considering her as the subject for a film portrait.

## Diverse path

Certainly her life has followed a diverse path from her birth on March 6, 1920, in Winnipeg.

After an early convent education, she spent her teenage years with her family on an isolated mink ranch in Manigotogan, Man., which was all

that her father had not lost in the Depression.

There she travelled by dog sled and educated herself by reading Aristotle and Plato in the well-stocked library of a learned neighbor who had been banished from his native Scotland on a "remittance" from his family.

Based on the knowledge she had acquired from the remittance man's library — "I could debate Karl Marx for hours" — she became one of the few female students of the venerable Father Athol Murray of the University of Ottawa's now-defunct Saskatchewan-based Notre Dame College.

Father Murray, a renegade priest from a well-heeled Toronto family who was shipped out West because of his unruly behavior, established Notre Dame in the 1930s in Wilcox, Sask.

Dickason met him on a short stint as a travelling magazine saleswoman after leaving her parent's Jumping Jenny Mink Farm, as it was affectionately named because of its changing fortunes.

Hunger was not a stranger during those years.

Following graduation from Notre Dame in 1943 and a year of teaching there, Dickason took a job as a gen-

eral and city-hall reporter at a Regina newspaper, launching a journalism career which would last more than 20 years.

She was married briefly, and when the marriage ended in a small Quebec town in 1949, after less than four years, Dickason headed to Montreal with her three daughters and the clothes on her back.

Supporting her daughters as a single mother was a constant financial struggle which forced her to put them in a foster home for the first five years, while she worked at *The Gazette*, as a reporter and then as women's editor.

"It wasn't very easy for a single mother in those days," she said in a recent interview with *The Gazette*. "There was no day care or such facilities.

"We could not claim our child expenses on our income tax. It wasn't the easiest thing in the world."

In 1955, she was offered a job in Toronto at the *Globe and Mail*, and with money borrowed from a friend, she bought a house in the Beaches area of the city, and brought her daughters to live with her at last.

While she was never aware of sexual discrimination against her in her job as a journalist — she was first a reporter and then an editor —

she was aware of the fact that as a reporter "there were certain things women didn't do."

## Didn't cover fires

They didn't cover fires, for instance, or drownings; she knew "there was only so far" she would go in the hierarchy of the newspaper.

She knew also that as women's editor at *The Gazette* and the *Globe and Mail*, she "had gotten as far as she was going to get."

But her dream was to continue her education, and in the late 1960s she spent three years as chief of information services at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, taking preparatory courses for her return to the University of Ottawa for a master's degree in history at the age of 52, followed by a doctoral degree five years later.

Journalism prepared her for life as an academic, she said, by teaching her to concentrate and zero in on pertinent information.

Today Dickason's area of speciality at the University of Alberta is Amerindian history, in which she has more than an academic interest.

She discovered, as an adult meeting some relatives in Saskatchewan for the first time, that she is part Metis.