

Connie McWatch: "I have a lot of blessings"

Narrative 6 of the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project

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In 2008, we interviewed women about their experiences of childbirth and maternity care in Marathon, a rural community in north-western Ontario. This narrative is one of a series of stories that resulted from the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project. All of the narratives in this series were edited from the interview transcripts, then reviewed and approved for publication by the women involved. We invite readers to see the accompanying research paper for more on the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project.¹

My grandmother, she delivered me, she delivered all of us. That's my mom's mom. She was on crutches all the time; she was born a cripple, but that didn't stop her. She'd get in the canoe and go out camping by herself. She'd pick up Indian medicine for us. A midwife for the whole reserve. They call her, lots of people call her, in Heron Bay and then Longlac, and White River. She was called all over. Oh yeah, she delivered lots of babies. I never heard anything that went wrong, eh, as far as I knew.

There's 18 of us in my family. Only 5 daughters and the rest were brothers. I'm the second-oldest. Born right in Mobert.* My brother died and then I was the oldest. I had 9 kids. Four of them were born with me on the reserve. I guess I'm the only one to have Grandma deliver my babies. I think I'm the only one out of my family. My mom, she always had her babies at home. My daughter Cheryl,[†] in her time, I don't think she never had babies right on the reserve in Mobert. She had them all in the hospital, every one of them. I don't think none of my sisters—no, they all had them in Marathon and one in Terrace Bay. My grandchildren, some of them were born in Thunder Bay; most of them were born in Marathon. Nobody was born in Mobert in the reserve, none of them. So they come here now, all the time, all the time in Marathon. There's no midwives in Mobert. Nobody at all.

She was amazing, my grandmother

I didn't have no trouble with my deliveries, I never did. They went well for me. She was amazing, my grandmother. She'd check on you all the time. And what she used to do, too, she'd get hot water, that's what she'd do with me, hot water all the time, clean. She got to be clean; she was a clean woman. And then she'd get a

cloth and she'd put hot water. You know, it was something, that old lady. That's what she did to me. When I get contractions, she'd look, eh, "Well, my girl," she says, "not too long from now, the baby's going to be born." Then she says to me, "I don't want you to lay back, to lay right down."

"But why, Granny? I like to lay down."

"No," she says, "sit up a little bit." And then the way she does to me, my legs like that. "Sit up a bit, and then you gotta help when you got contractions, you gotta help." I think that's what they do here too, but still, how did she know to do that? She says to me, "You gotta push, too, my daughter, my granddaughter," and the way she wanted me to breathe, too. I don't know what she does. They help you; they tell you to take it easy 1 week to 10 days; that's what she always tell me, take it easy. Yeah, they just tell us what to do, and we do it.

You just know that the baby's going to be born, I guess. My grandmother, what she did, she'd ask me what time you had your last period and she counts how many months. She says you count 4 days after you're finished your periods and that's when you got pregnant. And she was right, that old lady. She knew what time for her to come sit with you and wait 'til you start your labour pains. She come and stay with me, my grandma, she talk to me about what to do when I'm pregnant and all that. What to eat, what not to. Not to smoke. "Whatever you do, the baby has that too. And get up and walk around; don't just stay in bed. Go pick berries; you're going to pick berries. Don't go too far if you get tired," she said. So she got a piece of cloth that she tied around our neck for the baby, to hold up the baby. That's what she did with us so I don't have to carry all that weight. She put a nice white cloth around our stomachs and then around our neck, eh. It was good. I enjoyed it. We used to come and pick blueberries here lots. There's a lot of blueberries here in them days, before Marathon even was here.

I didn't even think of going to the hospital

After the babies are born, she gave you that medicine,

*Pic Mobert First Nation.

[†]The Marathon Maternity Oral History Project includes narratives from Cheryl McWatch,² Connie McWatch's daughter, and Marie Michano,³ Cheryl's daughter-in-law.

clean you right out, yeah. I even drink that myself. She deliver 4 of my kids, my grandmother did. They were born at home, right in my home, yeah. It was nice for me to have my babies with my grandmother. I trusted her. I know she been delivering babies way before I was born, even. And then when she was going to deliver my baby, I didn't even think of going to the hospital to have babies. She did my first one, then the next, and then the third one. She delivered 4 of my kids, 4 boys, and it was nothing for me, you know. I'm right at home. After the babies are born and they take everything out, the last birth, or whatever you call that, she puts it in a clean place, a clean white rag, and she tell somebody to go and hang it up way back in the bush. That's how they do it, the last birth. That's the way Indians did it. That's the way I was brought up. She'd wrap it up in a clean rag and after birth and tell, go paddle across the lake or go hang it up somewhere, and that's what she did, my grandmother. She was an amazing woman.

I'm going to tell you another thing—one of my babies, the third-oldest, he never had a bottle in his life. Breastfeed him right through 'til he was pretty near a year anyway. And today he is a healthy man. Never had a cold when he was a baby. I think now people are

breastfeeding, but 'til maybe 3 or 6 months, you know. My first one, I do not know, I had him in White River, where my husband's family is from. He died. Yeah, 3 days old, mind you, I breastfeed him. I don't know what happened, he wouldn't stop crying. He wasn't meant to live, that's the way I look at it. And then my second one, he died. They help you, they tell you to take it easy 1 week to 10 days, that's what she always tell me, take it easy. My granny told me, "You gotta watch what you're eating when you breastfeed the baby." You know, she was something, my grandmother.

That's what she was: an Indian medicine woman. That's what she did, our grandmother! Oh dear, my old grandmother. That's was my mom's mom. She died here in the hospital. She was 94. We were close, yeah. She couldn't do it anymore; she was getting kinda too old to do anything. Not only herself delivering the babies, she always had someone helping her. My other grandmother, and my mother-in-law. They'd come and they'd help her, and then they took over after she couldn't deliver any more babies, so they took over. They're all dead now. Nobody knows how to deliver babies or what to do. I'm getting old, I'm too old to do anything like that. I never even—I'm sorry today I didn't—I never did ask her. I should have been a medicine woman too, I guess!



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That's medicine, cedar brush

My dad's mom, Jane, she was a midwife too. All the stories she told me. I asked her, "How did you get here, Gran?" I talked in Indian all the time; I never talked in English, never. I say my prayers in Indian; my First Communion, I said it in Indian, in Ojibway. "How did you get here?"

And she told me. "I come from James Bay," she says. I don't know what they came down for, I don't know. Just her mom and her dad and her brother and her sister, there was 3 of them. She says she was 7 or 8 years old.

"How old were you when you got here, Granny?"

"I was 13 when I got here," she says to me.

Then I tell her, "Well, how did you get here?"

"We paddle from James Bay to here, Mobert." She says she paddles to Sault Ste Marie, you know, that St Lawrence River. She says, "You ever hear of St Marys River in The Soo? I paddled through that," she tells me. "All summer we traveled in the birch bark canoe." She was amazing too, that woman. "You know my girl," she says, "there was not one house."

"Where are you living then?"

"We live all in wigwams." That's all there was in Mobert way before I was born, when she was a little girl. Wigwams! That was over a hundred years, a long time about, I guess.

My uncle John, he had some kind of—I don't know what you call it—a disease, high fever. They couldn't deal with that in them days. We took him to Thunder Bay; we took him to Chapleau. There was no Marathon in them days. He was just a young boy, a teenager. My granny says to me one time, "You know, my girl," she says, "your uncle gonna get better."

She say, "You know, I'm going to take him to the bush." She made a great big wigwam. Nothing but cedar, cedar trees, my granny, and that's where she kept her son. So that's what she did, she kept him in that tent all summer.

I said, "Why did you do that?" Well, you know that cedar brush, for some Indians that's medicine, that's medicine, cedar brush. I think for 2 weeks she kept him in that. He got to be old, died old! You gotta respect Indian medicine, you gotta respect the bush. That's what I do. The cedar brush is powerful.

They didn't allow no family

I never got that kind of treatment when I had babies in the hospital. I had 5 in the hospital. It was okay; I didn't find it any different, me. I didn't think nothing. I never had no hard time neither in Marathon. The only thing, I was by myself; there was nobody with me. Just the nurses and the young doctor, that's all. No family, no friends. They didn't allow no family. I don't know what rules was, them days. I know they just dropped me off and then my husband or son would bring me, drop me

off, and that's it. I never did ask questions either. Once I had a baby, I'm happy. And then I always make sure I bring my cigarettes with me in my suitcase after a baby's born. I go around, I walk around outside and have my smoke. I wasn't smoking for 9 months!

Yes, I have a lot of blessings, I really have. I'm really, I'm proud to be a grandmother, and they're proud of me, too, my grandchildren, they are. I have ... I miscount, I miscount how many grandchildren I have. I got 17 grandchildren, but they got their own kids, yeah. Grandsons and granddaughters, they're all teenagers.

You know, my grandchildren are proud of me. They tell me, they says, "You know, you're something, Granny, the way you read the Bible and all that." I'm a praying woman, that's what I am. I pray; I read my Bible; I pray my rosaries and all that. I only went to grade 3, eh? They says, "Well, how did you learn?" I learned myself; I educate myself. Honest to God. I married my husband, Leonard. He'd read to me when we'd go to bed at night and then explain everything to me. That's why I learned lots from my husband. I only went to grade 3, but I read. I love my culture. There's only one Creator, He's only one. That's how I look at it.

"Go pick berries"

Nowadays, I don't know. It's a terrible thing—I don't know how to describe it—especially the newer generations, the younger generation. They're into everything. They smoke and they drink while they're pregnant. They're taking those pills and whatever to get them high and all that. You know, that's harming the baby. That's what you're doing. That's their own fault, the girls. And they know, they went to school, they're educated, those girls. I only went to grade 3 but I know you're not supposed to take nothing when you're pregnant. It says right on the cigarette package when you go to buy a smoke, pack of cigarettes, it's going to harm your baby. It shows on the box; still they do it.


I told that to my daughters, "Don't you ever drink." I never did. I'm a smoker, but I never had a cigarette while I was pregnant, I never had one drink or drop of alcohol, because that's the way I learned from my grandparents, from my mother. She says to me, "Whatever you drink, Connie, whatever you eat, you feed the baby." You see, they knew then, and this is a long time ago. When I first got pregnant, I was 19 years old, and that was how many years ago my grandmother taught me that. So, I told my daughters not to do that, so they did the same thing too; they never touch anything when they were pregnant. I try to tell my granddaughters not to do that. You shouldn't even have a cigarette. "What are you doing with that cigarette in your hand? You're pregnant." I'm praying all the time for them. I pray for my grandchildren, they're still my granddaughters. All I could do is just talk to them, talk to my grandchildren.

I tell them lots, my granddaughters, about the babies. I tell them not to lay down too long. "Go walk around," I said to them, "Walk around a couple hours, you know. Go pick berries."

You know what I told my kids? "Whenever I can't do anything for myself, put me in the hospital. Put me somewhere, that's what I want. I don't want to burden you."

"No, Mom, you're not going to burden us."

"Okay my dear!"

I don't know what's gonna happen, I just don't know. I'm going to go have a puff, a cigarette. That's one bad habit ... 

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Competing interests

None declared

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