

*Catherine Gillis*

*Yellowknife, NT*

*Yellowknife Aboriginal Community*

*27 years old*

### **My Grandmother**

My grandmother was born in a teepee tent in 1925. She had a twin sister that died in her early childhood due to complications at birth. My grandmother was the eldest of sixteen children. Life was hard growing up. As the eldest sibling it was her responsibility to help take care of her younger siblings.

She was born on the island of Old Fort Rae, Northwest Territories where wild flowers, rhubarb and onions grew. Her father was a trapper. He travelled to the Northwest Territories all the way from France with his three brothers. My grandmother still recalls the times her father would be gone for days on end on trapping expeditions and how she would worry about him until his return. He would come back with pelts for trade. My grandmother would help her father check the traps and would help by skinning muskrats, rabbits and duck. Her family primarily lived off the land for most of her childhood with little outside sources of food. Evidently, my grandmother grew up without a fridge, instead they kept their food cold by putting it in a cellar in the ground. Her mother lived until she was one hundred and five years old. I remember helping her to bring her teacup to her lips because she was so feeble and frail in her old age. We called her Gookum. Some people say that she was a medicine woman because she knew how to heal ailments by using various plants.

My grandmother was about five years old when the missionaries came. They brought her to a residential school where she would spend most of the year only to go home for the summer. She said she doesn't remember a lot but she recalls that the nuns would feed the children rotten fish and cut their hair short. To sum up her experience of residential school she said that the nuns

were uncaring but did not treat her with as much malice as some of the other children. She was in the residential school for four years. When she went home in her fourth year she told her father that they were mean to her and that she did not want to go back, so when it came time for her to go back her father stood up for her and said “She’s not going, she needs to stay here and help her mother.” If there is one thing she learned in residential school it was how to handwrite her name and to this day when she signs a legal document she always takes her time signing her full name to perfection.

Anyone that knows my grandmother knows that she has a wonderful talent; sewing. She could sew anything. Now that she is older she can’t sew as well because her eyes don’t have the same precision as when she younger and her hands are riddled with arthritis. When she did sew though, she would sew for people in the community and by contract that was how she made her living. She was especially good at beading, immaculate actually. She made beaded mocassins, purses, gloves, slippers you name it and she could string a bead on it. She could sew a parka in a couple of days. She taught a regular sewing class once a week in the community. Everyone wanted her beadwork. One time in particular she was chosen to make a beaded sash for the Pope. That was a very special project for her as she is a catholic woman which mad her feel very honored. Yet, even though she was the best at what she did, she was very modest. She would delight in a nice compliment, clandestinely.

My grandmother has dealt with many losses in her lifetime. Her first love was a Royal Canadian Mounted Police Officer. Together they had three children. He regularly travelled from his base in Fort Rae to Old Fort Rae across the Great Slave Lake. Old Fort Rae is approximately one hour by speed boat from Frank’s Channel. The waters of the Great Slave between those two points can sometimes be very rough and many people have had their boats overturned. Unfortunately, her first love drowned in a storm coming back from Old Fort Rae.

My grandmother did not have to raise her three children for very long by herself. Her mother helped her with the two older boys until one day, a boat full of workers came ashore and one of the men on the boat was my grandfather. They went on to have three more children; two girls and a boy.

Tragically, my grandmother lost her three boys. Her oldest son died on the way to my Christening, driving from Fort Rae to Yellowknife he was found on the side of the road in his car, asphyxiated. Her middle son was murdered by his wife while they were under the influence, and her youngest son went missing. There is probable reason to believe that her youngest son is deceased but the police have not found his body as of yet, and he has been missing since 1983. My grandma does not talk about these unfortunate events as the memories are too painful for her. I had to do some digging in the family closet to find out. Ultimately I pieced the information together through spurts of information over the years.

Eventually, the family moved to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories where my grandmother took a job at the historic Wild Cat Café where she was paid a dollar a day to wash dishes. She tells us this story as an example of how different things were in those days and how one dollar was considered to be a lot of money back then.

Through the years both of my grandparents suffered from alcoholism. I think it was their way of dealing with the grief of losing three of their children. One night my grandmother had a dream. She dreamt that her oldest son came to her and asked her to quit drinking. The next day she put down the bottle and has not touched a drop since. My grandfather followed her shortly afterwards. They had good reasons for quitting; my sister and I needed them to care for us because our mother also suffered from alcoholism which resulted in us ending up in foster homes for a lot of our childhood. Our grandparents assumed guardianship of my sister and I which saved us from getting lost in the system.

Growing up with my grandmother as the primary caregiver was worthy of note because she was not your typical grandma. My grandmother was an ox. She was tough as nails. Whenever we got in trouble we would get the wooden spoon or we would get chased down the hall in our apartment building with the broom. At the best of times she would make us “hotcakes” with extra syrup and cut our caribou meat for us. She never made us do chores and always made sure that we had clean clothes to wear. Growing up we didn’t have a lot of money. My grandma got by with the money that she made from sewing. We had makeshift beds on the floor and the entire

family crammed into a little one bedroom apartment. We used milk crates as dressers and had Salvation Army Christmases. Yet even though, we did not have much, she would always give us money for lunch everyday and make sure that we got to do things that other kids our age were doing so that we did not feel left out.

A couple of years ago my grandma had a bad fall outside of the bank downtown. Before her fall, my grandmother was on the hefty side but shortly after her fall she began losing weight, rapidly. She complained of numbness in her legs and had difficulty walking. No one knew what was wrong with her we didn't connect the dots right away that maybe it could be something to do with her fall. She was in a lot of pain and no amount of pain killers would help her. We finally took her to a specialist and realized that she had slipped a disk in her spine from when she fell nearly two years before. The only way to fix her slipped disk was for her to go under the knife and have back surgery. My grandma was terrified; she did not want to do it. We pleaded with her that she wasn't going to get any better if she didn't. She was so scared but she did it, at eighty years old she had undergone major back surgery and it was a success. She felt so much better afterward and slowly starting gaining back the weight that she had lost and was no longer in pain.

These days my grandma is taken care of by her youngest daughter. She has lost more than fifty percent of her hearing, she has cataracts in both of her eyes, she no longer sews because of her arthritis yet she always has a smile on her face. She tells us stories of the days of her life and says that she is still young and jokes about her many boyfriends. She still wears her bright red lipstick and dots it on her cheeks for blush. My grandmother is my strength, my wisdom, my angel and my mother. Without her guidance throughout my life I would be far from the person I am today, I admire her patience, sincerity, courage and all of her many other good qualities. My greatest accomplishment in life would be to say that I have gained an ounce of her kindness and compassion and encompass the same values as she does. I am proud to be her granddaughter.

### *Author's Statement*

My name is Catherine Gillis. I am the proud granddaughter of Alice Lafferty. I feel that my grandmother's story needs to be heard. She is a positive role model because she has been through many hardships yet has maintained a desirable resiliency to those that know her life story. She is a strong woman that is to be admired. My grandma has a history full of culture and values that have been ingrained in her since birth. She has been through the residential schools, dealt with alcoholism, grieved over loved ones lost and is still able to overcome.

My grandma is a well respected elder in the community. She is the last living person to be born in Old Fort Rae, Northwest Territories. If you give her five minutes of your time she can tell you stories that will take you back to her childhood that you will never forget. She will bring you with her to her younger days growing up on the island of Old Fort Rae. She can vividly describe the lightning storms that would put three foot holes in the ground outside of her home. She can describe to you the soil of her native land and what types of plants grew there.

I was lucky enough to pay homage to her birthplace in the summer of 2001 on an archeological expedition. She accompanied me and one day she pointed out to a rock shaped as a dog team in the far distance of the lake. She said that as a child in the winter time she would think that rock formation was of her father coming home from another one of his trapping voyages.

I wrote this story because it is my way of advocating for our elders. They tend to be forgotten in our busy lives. They deserve the highest respect, yet we seldom give them our full attention. I am lucky to be able to sit down and listen to all of my grandmothers thoughtful stories and will miss them when she is gone. We need to take time out of our busy lives to give back by doing simple things for our elders, even if it is just the effortless act of listening. All of our elders have a story to tell, it's just a matter of giving them the attention that they are worthy of.