

'To forget and forgive'

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ROSEAU RIVER, Manitoba — Shirley Littlejohn lives on the Roseau River First Nation, about 80 kilometres south of Winnipeg.

She was born in 1947 on a reserve that sits in the flood plain between the Red and Roseau Rivers, just east of the highway that runs from Winnipeg to the U.S. border.

She's the matriarch of her family, a mother of four, grandmother of 20 and a great-grandmother of five. Her face is round and she speaks softly, often pausing a long time between words.

Her life story, though unique, is also representative of many themes that emerge from the 2006 census on aboriginal peoples.



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Shirley Littlejohn stands in front of a wall of family pictures at her home in Roseau River (*Globe and Mail/John Woods*)

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Her living room overflows with photos of a growing, young family. As a grandparent, she has several times acted as the primary care giver to a grandchild. Members of her family have died young, an all-too common occurrence in a population where life expectancy is substantially lower than the national average. Her formal education ended at age 12, a legacy of the damage done by residential schools, but she strongly encourages the younger generation to pursue their studies. She also believes the traditional Ojibway language will die with her generation, because she has been unable to pass it on. Finally, she lives in a house she doesn't own, whose condition embarrasses her, and which she thinks contributes to her ill health.

Ms. Littlejohn, 60, shares her home with her common-law husband John Johnson, 66, and three grandchildren. Her granddaughter Melissa, 19, has lived with her for a little more than a year. Melissa's parents live only a few hundred metres away on the reserve, but she prefers living with her grandmother because the house isn't as crowded. Norvin, 19, is Ms. Littlejohn's grandson and Melissa's cousin.

“His dad lives in Winnipeg and his mom's in Pukatawagan. I raised him since he was a baby,” Ms. Littlejohn said.

Another grandson, 12-year-old Steven, also lives with Ms. Littlejohn, and until a week ago she had a granddaughter's young family under her roof, too, but they were able to move to a new trailer on the reserve.

“All my life that's what I know how to do is look after kids. I love kids,” she said.

She gave birth to her first child at 19, and had five more over the ensuing years. Two died; one at just two weeks old, the other, a 17-year-old son, was killed in a fire that destroyed her home on the reserve. It's a painful memory, and she still wakes in the middle of the night panicked about the sound of the fire alarm.

Growing up on the east side of the reserve, known as Roseau Rapids, Ms. Littlejohn was the youngest of seven children. Only she and one other sibling are still alive.

She was taken away to residential school as a young girl, and spent three years in Portage La Prairie and two years in Brandon, Manitoba. The schools were awful, she said, the hardest thing she's ever been through in her life.

In Brandon, when she was 12, she was in a class with a cousin who was sick and was constantly in trouble with the teacher.

“My cousin would sleep in school, he would sit down and sleep right away, and the teacher would grab his hair and pound his head right down on the desk and say “Get up you lazy Indian. Go stand in the hallway,” she said.

Her cousin's health worsened until one day he pulled her aside, even though they weren't allowed to speak to each other, and pleaded with her to write to her mother.

“He said write a letter to Grandma that I'm sick,” she said. “That's what he told me, I'm very sick. I said ‘I know you're sick’ So that day I wrote a letter to my mum and I told [her] that he was very sick and that they were beating him up instead, pounding his head on that desk. Just before Christmas he fell down when we were having fun, and they rushed him to the hospital. He never came back. He died in the hospital. I've never forgotten that. I never forgot what he asked me to do. But my letters were all ripped up.”

That was the last year she spent in formal education. Her mother received a letter from the boarding school saying she had been expelled and would not be allowed to attend any other school in the province.

“I wanted to go back to school because I was one of the smarter kids in class, too. I wanted to become a teacher. I wanted to go to school so badly,” she said.

It's a painful memory for her, one that has influenced everything in her life ever since. Asked about her hopes for the future, she said: “Just to forget, and forgive.”

Ms. Littlejohn wonders if she had become a teacher whether she might have been able to pass on the Ojibway language her parents spoke. It's taught as a second language at the reserve school, but her grandchildren can't speak it much more than to count to 10.

“I try [to teach it] but it doesn't work, because they're always talking in English,” she said. “It's already gone. Gone for good. There's only a couple families that are teaching their kids.”

On a reserve where the chief says unemployment is more than 75 per cent, Ms. Littlejohn said she is fortunate enough to have worked all her life. She now has a housekeeping job at the seniors home.

With the exception of a few years spent in Winnipeg living with a sister when she was a teenager, she has lived all her life on the reserve. Despite the greater opportunity that might be available in the city, she hasn't been tempted to move, she said.

“We were talking about leaving but we decided not to. We got too many of our kids here,” she said.

But life is far from perfect on the reserve. Her home, provided by the federal government and maintained by the band, is a major source of unhappiness. For the first three years she lived there, the heating didn't work. She heated the whole house with the kitchen stove, she said. Even now, the heat is sporadic, she said, and every year the basement floods with a foot of water.

If she could change one thing in her life, it would be the floor in her home, which is scarred with deep holes.

“It embarrasses me all the time. When we have people [over] we have to move carpets to hide everything,” she said.

She also believes the powder emitted by the eroding floors contributes to breathing problems, something everyone in the house is suffering from, she said.

“We have asthma. I'm losing my voice,” she said. Pointing to the holes she added, “it comes off when you sweep the floor, that dust.”

Many of her windows are boarded up, and none of them open. If she slams the door, the boards can fall out, she said.

She worries about her granddaughter as she tries to avoid hanging around the kids who want to drink and smoke drugs, and she worries about the terror of local youths who last year broke into several homes and torched them, just for fun. There's always someone home at her house for that reason, she said.

But despite her anxiety, Ms. Littlejohn was optimistic about the future. Things are getting better.

Just last month she gathered her entire family around her Christmas tree and, with the money from her residential schools compensation, bought magnificent gifts for all her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. It was the happiest moment of her life, she said.

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