

Some Women of the Porcupine Camp

*Black and white portraits by Mary-Theresa Lawlor
Stories edited by Tannis Atkinson*

One of the well-known stories that surrounds mining in northern Ontario is that in 1909 a prospector accidentally slipped on moss and exposed strings of gold in the rock near what is now South Porcupine. In the 1920s and 1930s, three major mines were developed in the Porcupine Camp and many people came to the area.

Initially, the number of women in the camps was small. But historical research done on the Porcupine rarely mentions the women whose work helped form the rough bush into a community. Theirs is an important history to tell.

The story of the Porcupine Camp is the story of many single-industry towns in Canada, following a cycle of growth and decline. But an economic description does not tell the whole story of these communities: does not speak of the daily rhythms of life, the pleasures and diversions and work that sustained them, or of the lives that started and ended in them.

"Some Women of the Porcupine Camp" was initiated by Mary-Theresa Lawlor, raised in South Porcupine. As a child, she was aware of the strong ties that bound families to one another through the women. As Mary-Theresa visited with her mother and listened to women's descriptions of the early days, she realized how little of this information was being shared. The local history she learned at school focussed on prospectors and miners, not on the women who were a vital part of building the community. She wanted to document the women's lives before they were completely forgotten, before their stories died with them.

Tannis' role was to choose excerpts from the taped interviews and to present them in a way that preserved and accurately reflected the various women's voices.

During May of 1992, the exhibit appeared at the Timmins Museum Centre. It included portraits of 17 women, antique photographs from several women's collections, and 34 stories. These are some of the photographs and stories from that exhibition.

Dedicated to the memory of Amabile Didone and Theresa Malette.



Mrs. Tadej Hands, 1991

We work hard...
You English people, you never work hard.
You never, you never... you never *slave* like we...
We were slave. You know what I mean slave.

I scrubbed a lots. My store.
And even before
in the old house,
I scrubbing and scrubbing and washing,
use the lye and...all strong soap.
See that's, that's what I...
my my *hands* were wore out.
Not only my,
everybody who want to do the good job.

You people too *soft*.
You don't
how you save you hands.
You can't keep the clean
if you save the hands.

— Mary Tadej

I marry in Italy. I stay two years there.
 My husband come here.
 He came first...work in mine here.
 He work when he come here...when he die he work there...
 ...he come here two year before me, eh?
 I say, if you going in Canada, I no marry you.
 He says, no, you come to me. After marry, he call me...
 He gotta make the money.
 After two year coming here.
 Twenty-five year (old). And eighty-seven (now)...
 I come in from Italy 1930... I come on the boat.
 I stop at Montreal, no, New York. The boat...
 After I go, go train, you know? To Hamilton.
 I gotta two brother there at the time. I stop two day there.
 Yeah. And after I come here... Oh, all bush...
 Lots of fun, yeah. Lots of work.
 Carry in the bush... Wood for the fire...
 I live same place now...build it house myself.
 On the back home now. Now how get it house, get it a barn.
 Just one barn there where you living.
 ...one bedroom, and the room. Little kitchen beside...Sure!
 I got it two kids, my husband is at work.
 I got it a cow, I got a pig. I got it the grass for the cow...
 No water in the house. I gotta go over French people there
 and get it the water. Because no water.
 After I drink it I got to go the pail, you know?
 Go get a water...because my husband at work.
 I gotta just the children home.
 Because I no got nobody here... Everybody...we happy...
 happy because I come here with my husband.
 I gotta my kid with me... After this one, another two. Twins.
 She die. She live...one month, two month and she die.

—Amabile Didone



Amabile Didone, Hands, Gate & Glass, 1992



Theresa Malette and Hat, 1991

I have no relations down here at all.
 I come here, I didn't know anybody.
 I was kind of lonesome.
 We didn't go on no honeymoon or nothing.
 We just moved right down here.
 He had no time off.
 Got married one day
 and go to work the next day.
 We had to go to work.
 There was no holidays, like.
 Nobody took holidays in those days.
 They had to work.
 If they wanted to get money,
 they had to work for it. And work hard, too.
 When you make sixty-five cents an hour,
 or something like that,
 that's not a heck of a lot of money.
 Of course, everything was cheap then, too, eh?
 Paid ten, fifteen cents for a loaf of bread.

— Theresa Malette

I'm not really shy person.
 But once, that's in wintertime....
 And I cook in that where I sleep.
 That camp.... I havin' just corner
 and puttin' in two top of blankets...
 separate it in bedroom for me. Yes.
 And then in they talkin' so awful things
 and dirty things for women.
 And one evening I just finished washing dishes
 and I go in and I stand in and I say,
 "Hey, listen boys!
 Why did you talk like that for women?
 You, everybody you love the women."
and I talk and talk and after that they...stop...
 They not say those dirty things
 and anything like that....
 I 'pposed to say earlier, but I'm scared little bit...
 And I'm only one woman there....All those men....
 Because there's sometimes in
 twenty mens and sometime more....
 And I'm the cook. I have to do everything....
 I get the fifty dollars in month....
 And girls in town in that time, you know,
 ten dollars and fifteen dollars. A month...Yeah....
 I get them fifty dollars. And, oh, I'm so happy, so happy.
 Because I have to pay my tickets back.
 My uncle gave me money. And I have to pay back....
 But, see, lots of lonely times....
 Breakfast you have to be in four o'clock makin' pancakes
 and then they wantin' porridge and somebody want eggs and,
 you know, have to cook everything ready when mens in....
 I have to have it....Have to.
 No money, no funny. (laughing)

—Saima Kaitola



Courtesy of Aileen Laamanen



Courtesy of Aileen Laamanen

...my dad was up here at the time of the fire, eh?
 ...we had some wonderful stories of the fire that he told us...
 And then I had some friends that I met
 from the time of the fire
 and one of her sons was born ...
 Oh, she had to stand in the water.
 You know the smoke was all around and the fire burning.
 And I think there was about ten, twelve babies
 born that time right in the water.
 She stood in the water
 and she couldn't get out of the water
 because it was burning all around.
 You just wonder. She had pictures and everything....
 Apparently, the other children were born,
 they were all right.
 But I think he came a little bit early.
 And after they were born
 they were all standing in that water.
 Well, they couldn't come,
 because it was all burning, all fire.
 All bush around here, and it was all burning.
 All bush, eh? And that was the only place left.
 In the water.
 And I think at one time
 they had blankets over their heads.
 And she was a smart old lady, too.

—Sadie Price

Tannis Atkinson worked in adult literacy in Toronto for many years. Working on this project was her introduction to life in a northern community. In 1993 she moved to Whitehorse. Mary-Theresa Lawlor is proud to have worked on this project, which is unlike any documentation of life in the Porcupine. Her vision for the project came out of Read All About It!, a project she worked on with Tannis at the Lakeshore Literacy Project in Etobicoke.