

# How We Were Growing Up as a Yukon First Nations Girl

by Marilyn Jensen

*Cet article est un extrait d'une entrevue avec Ida Calmegane, la fille de la regrettée Angela Sydney. Ida décrit sa*



Ida Calmegane

*vie d'enfant élevée dans la nation Inland Tlingit ainsi que les us et coutumes Tagish. Cette période de l'enfance de Ida marque un temps de grands changements dans la vie des autochtones du Yukon.*

While working as a researcher on the Elders' Documentation Project, I had the opportunity to interview many Yukon First Nations women. They spoke extensively about growing up in the Yukon and, more specifically, about the roles women played in First Nations communities.

One of the Elders I interviewed, Ida Calmegane, is Inland Tlingit and Tagish. She is a member of the Deisheetaan Clan (Split Tail Beaver). Ida is the daughter of the late Kashduk and Ch'ooehte'Ma (George and Angela Sidney). Ida is a woman who has retained much of the old knowledge due to the tutoring she

received from her mother and grandmother. She is now quickly taking her place as an important teacher of cultural knowledge.

Ida graduated from a practical nursing program and worked at Whitehorse General Hospital for 12 years. In addition, Ida has acquired much knowledge in traditional medicines of the North. She now shares this knowledge at seminars across North America.

In our interview, Ida talked about her life as a child growing up in the Tagish and Inland Tlingit ways. The period of Ida's childhood reflects a time of great change and upheaval to the First Nations peoples of the Yukon. Her stories express these changes and depict how her people adapted. Ida is from a generation of Elders who have seen, heard, and experienced much about the old ways but who have also experienced life as a First Nations person in a contemporary world.

Ida and her stories have given me such delight and wealth. She is my relative and her stories are a part of me and my heritage. When she speaks of her grandmother I have the opportunity to get to know my great-grandmother and about her fascinating life in a time that seems so distant from now. When I hear Ida's stories I can feel my roots and origins to this land and to this history take hold. I feel a sense of dignity and pride.

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Well, I was born in Little Atlin Lake on October the 21st, 1928, and my nurse was Daisy Smith. She was the one that delivered me. My mom always said, she was the one that caught you. I'm a *Deisheetaan*. My mother and my grandmother were *Deisheetaan* and in the Indian tradition we follow our mother's clan. My Indian name is *Kaax'anshee* and *La. oos Tlaa*. I was named after my grand-

mother. My Indian names are from my grandmother's name, Maria Johns. The old people are the ones that give the names and my name was given to me, I believe, by my grandmother. Because she was there living with my mom at the time. And that's where I got the name. Whenever she spoke to me she always say *Ax saye* instead of calling me by name, she always said that, *Ax saye*. It means my name sake. *Ax saye* means my name. That's the way she always referred to me when she was talking to me or about me.

My mother was an old timer. She was brought up the old ways. When she became a young lady, she was one of the last people that wore a big hat. [When young women began to menstruate, they wore a ritual bonnet while in seclusion.] And she was under that hat for about six weeks I guess when my grandfather's sister came along and took her out of that tent and out from under that hat. Because my grandmother was going blind and she couldn't see very good and she was having a hard time trying to cook and look after the rest of the kids. So, my aunt came along and she told my mom, she said "you're having too much trouble without your daughter, you better take her out of there now, everything is changing now days," she said, "and you got to take her out because she's the one that could help you she's your eyes," she told grandma. So she went there and because she was from the opposite clan she was able to do that, she took mom out of that out of the tent. So mom, up until till Auntie Dora was big enough to help, mom was the one that took care of the family at home. She made clothes for her brothers and sewed and everything. She did everything. She was a wonderful sewer. And she made clothes too for her and grandma and for her brothers and stuff.

Well, when we were growing up our grandmother used to live with us all the time. She used to live with the different families like she live with uncle Peter's family for a few months and uncle Johnny's and our family. Old people, people long time ago they never put their elders in homes. We never had any group home or old folks home or anything like that.

They [her mother's family] grew up around Tagish area. They came up to Carcross just once in awhile like to fish. It was good fishing around here and they come up to fish and hunt caribou. Caribou used to cross here that's why they used to call it Caribou Crossing. They had an Indian name for that. Tagish Kwaan moved up here when railroad came through. They used to live over in this side because it was nice and sandy and clean. And this was the Carcross village in this area. They put the train crossing through here because it was the narrowest place. So the village moved across the river and it kept going further down and further down where it is now.

All the little kids had to listen to what the Elders have to say and we have to do things for each other. Our parents tell us we have to go and sit in such and such a place and do some chores and stuff. You just did it, you just did it, and you never expect any money or favours in return. You just went because that's the way you were brought up. You had to do these things.

She [Maria Johns, Ida's grandmother] taught us all of the time. Most of the time when we were going to bed and when she took us out on the trails and stuff she used to tell us.

You have to do things like this. She show us how to set snares for little game and stuff. So she used to talk to us when we were walking around in the bush all the time. I remember one time one of my dad's uncles came over from Skagway and he talked to us when we were really little. Annie was there but I don't know if she remember it but I remember. They used to talk to us about our life as a



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young girl where we couldn't get involved with our own clan members and the importance of that. He said when we're growing up we can't go anyplace or do anything to shame our families and he said if that happened our brothers take us out for a walk in the bush and then come back without us. My father was really very strict with us about who we talked to and everything. He always really made sure that he paid particular attention to that. When my uncle told us that, it was really sort of scary and made us really behave ourselves. We knew we weren't supposed to do anything to shame our clan, our parents, everything.

We were well chaperoned whenever we go anywhere. It was different then now. We went to dances and stuff, our parents take us to dance. I remember when we were really young one time we went to dance at Christmas time. Everybody went to the dance, all the children too, and they took us down to that big hall, Patsy's Hall they call it. And they had a big double bed there and they put all the babies to sleep. But all of the kids that could sit up, they put blanket down for us and then they put blanket over us, and we were just like a cord of wood, up on top that bed and we could look out the door and watch the people dancing. The boys went under the bed and I guess they had blankets there too. I remember Betty and I, we were watching them and I remember seeing Mrs. Patsy dancing and really having a good time. I hear her saying when she was dancing "Whew, whew, whew," something like that, and I said to Betty, "Boy can she ever dance" (laughs). I remember seeing them all having a good time and nobody ever had paid baby-sit-

ters. They weren't allowed to drink and they didn't drink in the hall and everybody was up, every dance everybody was dancing. And they took all the kids because we wanted to go and watch and we watch for a little while and then we would end up sleeping and our parents just pack us home from there. So that's the way it was like. Our Grandmother, I guess she stayed at home because we wanted to go and watch, so, they took us. We all were allowed to go to the dance.

I remember one time her [grandmother] telling me, my mom was out setting net or getting the net going, something with the fish in the fall time. Dad was out hunting and she

said to me "We got to cook for Daddy now, he's going to come home from hunting and he's going to be hungry," she said. And she said, "Let's get busy." And I said, "Okay," and she said, "What you going to do?" "I'm going to make a cake" I told her. Grandma couldn't see very good at that time but she was making bread and she she could do it just by feel. Then she said I was really busy there, monkeying around, and then all of a sudden I brought this big plate over to her and I had made a big mud pie and put fireweeds on top to decorate it up. (all laugh) And she said she really thought I was making something and here it was this big mud pie. (laughs)

*Marilyn Jensen (Yadultrin) was born and raised in the Yukon Territory and she is the daughter of Phillip and Doris McLean. She is a descendent from the Tagish (Athabaskan) and Inland Tlingit people of the Southern Yukon cultural areas and she is a member of the Dak'le'weidi clan (Killer whale). Marilyn lives in Whitehorse and works as a researcher on the Elders Documentation Project at Council for Yukon Indians. In addition to her interests in Yukon First Nations culture and oral history, Marilyn is an artist and has produced illustrations for some recent publications. Marilyn graduated from the University of Alaska with a B.A. in Anthropology.*

## Angela Sidney



Photo: Yukon Government

Angela Sidney, respected Elder of Tagish and Tlingit parents, member of the Crow Clan, was born in 1902, near Tagish, Yukon. She spent many years living a traditional life on the land, hunting and trapping, first with her parents, then with her brother, Johnnie Johns, and later, with her husband and children.

As a child around the campfire and during the long winter months, Angela learned the stories and legends from her parents, aunts and uncles, in both the Tagish and Tlingit languages.

In April of 1986, Angela was awarded the Order of Canada for her work in language and cultural revival. She has recorded oral history and her songs and stories appear in many publications. She has also provided the Tagish and Tlingit names of many locations in southern Yukon.

*"Wolf and Raven are brothers-in-law. Crow, when he made people, he made poplar tree bark and he carves it like a person. And he breathes into it, and it comes to life. And he made a Crow woman. He says, "You're my friend, you Crow, he tells this woman."*

*And he made a Crow man too. And he made them marry each other. And here they won't talk to each other. They were shy to each other. And he made a Wolf man and a Wolf woman. And they marry each other too. But the same. No, they don't talk to each other.*

*So Crow changes partners. And by gosh, they start to laugh and play with each other! They're not shy any more.*

*"All right," he says, "you people change yourselves." And they change themselves. That's why a Crow never marries, is not supposed to marry, Crow. It's against the law. Long time ago people don't allow that—for Crow to marry Crow.*

*Nowadays people marry each other. They don't care. But it doesn't matter how far Crow as long as it's Crow, it's supposed to be our brother."*

Note: Angela Sydney passed away on July 17, 1991.

*Excerpted from Part of the Land, Part of the Water, by Catharine McClellan, published in 1987 by Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver. Reprinted with permission.*