

Growing Up on Both “Sides of the Fence”

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Growing up in Hazelton with an Indian Mother and a White Father and Indian Grandparents and White Grandparents was an experience in itself! Most children brought up with two cultures to guide them; kept you hopping. I never even knew of my heritage until a school was built and called an amalgamated school. It was then that they bussed kids in from other towns and I could sort of “see the difference”. It wasn’t long before the racist innuendos by the white kids would come out. I could never understand that because as far as I was concerned; this was MY school in MY town and they were “sort” of visitors and why did they treat us like that? With nine kids in the family; we were all brought up to be proud of who we were and that stuck with us all our lives. I was devastated when some of my cousins and friends were taken away from their families to go to residential school. As a kid; you never quite understood what that was all about. I just looked forward to summer when they would all come home again and I could be with them.

I had a very happy childhood but that wasn’t the case with some of my friends. Their parents drank and that was the only life they knew. I loved playing with the kids whose parents were in the bar as the kids would stand outside and their parents would give them pop, candy, chips and money and away we would go to the Chinese café to spend the money. I am of the age where 25 cents bought two comic books and a chocolate bar! I remember asking my parents why they didn’t go to the bar and drink? Because if they did; I could also get all the goodies that the other children got; thinking this was a good thing and I was really missing out!

Growing up in a small town was the greatest as we could play any sport we wanted. With no such thing as TVs or computers; we lived outside. Hazelton is built on three terraces with the top one being the Indian graveyard, the second tier was where most of the Indians lived and the bottom tier was the “downtown” part. We would spend hours up in the graveyard playing. At that time, each grave had some kind of a “dollhouse look” over them with little picket fences. But, when my Dad came out onto our back porch and yelled “supper!” (which, by the way could be heard all over town), we had exactly five minutes to get home!

Life wasn’t all about playing, of course. From a very early age; I learned how to do many things from my Indian Grandmother. Every summer, she would take us berry picking on Nine Mile Mountain. We would camp out there for a week and there would be several families along with us. I don’t see them today in this world but we had “berry pickers” which was a small wooden box with “claws” and we could go through the blueberry and

huckleberry bushes very quickly with them. Our grandmother, whom we called NA AH, which really meant MOM in Indian would be there with a huge “berry box” on her back to carry the berries. This wooden box had Indian carved paintings or carvings on them and had a big rope attached to it so Na-ah could carry it on her back. After a few hours, we would go back to where we were camping and start cleaning the berries. We were not allowed to eat even ONE berry until that job was done. The Moms and Grandmothers would then cook dinner and then we would get a bowl of berries with canned milk and sugar on them. We waited all day for that wonderful dessert! Na-ah and Mom also had a field as far as the eye could see out behind her house. In that field was a huge garden with every kind of berry you could think of. There were strawberries, raspberries, black currants, red currants, gooseberries and rhubarb. Along with the wild berries from the mountain; I proceeded to help her canning all this as well as the garden produce. I was terrified of her root cellar where she put her root vegetables, fruit preserves and canned salmon and I would only go down the ladder if I had a brother or sister with me!

With my Mom always seeming to be in the hospital having babies; I was the only daughter for a long time as Mom had four sons before another daughter came along! So, the onus was on me to be the big sister at all times with cooking, cleaning, laundry etc. Not too many young women nowadays have learned all that in their youth! I have to admit that it was a big role for me to play as a teenager along with going to school, playing sports and working part time at the good old age of thirteen! At nineteen, I married my boyfriend; thinking I could get out of the house and have less work to do! When I was having my first child; Mom was having her last! In today’s society; that would have been scoffed at but I was very proud to have Mom and her baby beside my son and me. We brought up those two boys together even though my youngest brother was the Uncle and my son was the Nephew! They are still close to this day and are more like brothers. They were born six weeks apart and grew up to each have a son six weeks apart as well!

Now I am a grandmother of eight grandchildren and three step-grandchildren and it’s sad that some of them will never know what life was like on the res! Of course, there were a lot of children not as fortunate as me and when I go back home; I still see the same problems we were faced with years ago. My Mom worked hard all her life to try and make a difference but she never saw it in her lifetime. Will I see it in my lifetime? Should I move back to the reserve so I can try and make a difference, too? Time will tell when I retire!

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