



NATIVE WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA



Storytelling: Beatrice's Story



For years, communities have pointed to the high numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has been honoured to work with families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to share the story of their loved one. As part of the storytelling process, families' are also invited to share their experiences with the justice system, media, victim services and other institutional and community supports.

Storytelling is a way of teaching and learning. The stories shared by family members are intended to raise awareness, educate, and promote change. They have been told to honour the daughters, sisters, mothers and grandmothers that have been lost to violence and remember those still missing. This is what their stories tell us.

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The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is honoured to work with families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to share the story of their loved one. To view all of the stories shared, or for more information this work, please visit NWAC's website at www.nwac.ca.



Granny Beatrice's Teachings: Beatrice Sinclair's Story

Beatrice Harriet Passage Sinclair was from Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. She was born in Peguis First Nation around 1909. She was the oldest of 18 siblings. At 65 years of age, Beatrice was found raped and beaten to death under a bridge in Winnipeg. Her body was laid to rest on the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation.

Beatrice is remembered as a beloved grandmother and a strong Cree woman. She had at least three homes on the Brokenhead reserve where she was the primary caregiver to many of her grandchildren. Her granddaughter, Sharon Bruyere, has fond memories of the enormous role her Granny played in her childhood.

One of Sharon's most cherished childhood memories is a testament to Beatrice's loving and warm-hearted character. Sharon remembers sleepovers at Beatrice's house in Brokenhead where there was no electricity or running water. The grandchildren would sleep with Granny Beatrice in her big, old steel frame bed with heavy blankets piled atop them tightly. Come morning, Beatrice would get up, put her slippers on and tell all of the grandchildren to stay in bed until the kitchen was warm. Before long they would smell breakfast cooking and Beatrice would call out, "Come to the kitchen, stay warm!"

Sharon's biological mother was an alcoholic and she considers her Granny Beatrice the closest thing she had to a mother. Beatrice taught Sharon valuable work skills while always ensuring that Sharon and her other grandchildren balanced work and play. One year the grandchildren wanted to celebrate Halloween but they had no costumes and to make matters worse a huge snowstorm had just hit the reserve. Beatrice was determined that her grandchildren should have fun on this occasion so she dressed them up in old clothes, used her makeup to paint their faces and carted them down the road on a sled to collect candy and apples. Beatrice went to these lengths to make her grandchildren feel good.

As a head of the family, Beatrice passed down the teachings she had gathered throughout her life to her grandchildren. Whether teaching through her actions or espousing certain values, Beatrice made sure that her grandchildren were well-raised. Beatrice would always offer coffee or tea to anyone who came into her home and would feed them whenever she could. Her guests would sit by the stove to keep warm. In addition to these manners, Beatrice taught Sharon to be respectful and to love children. Beatrice taught her grandchildren how to use leaves and herbs for medicinal purposes, passing on Cree traditional knowledge. Sharon and her cousin Sharon Ward still carry these teachings and values given to them by Beatrice.

Sharon was only 10 years old when Granny Beatrice died in 1974. At this age, Sharon had not experienced death and did not understand what relatives meant when they told her that her grandmother “died.” It was not until the day of the funeral, the day they took Beatrice’s body to the church, that Sharon began to understand death. She cried, “I’ll never see my Granny anymore. There will be no one to comfort me, keep me warm, make me duck soup, make me moccasins, tell me that she loved me. She was the only one that said that she loved me. My Gram was very, very important.”

Alcoholism was present in Beatrice’s family, a fact that could be related to many family members’ attendance at residential school. Sharon recalls not being able to properly mourn her grandmother on the day of the funeral because of the drinking that took place. With Beatrice no longer alive to shelter her grandchildren from alcoholism in the family, Sharon’s life started to spiral downwards. Nevertheless, the values Beatrice had instilled in Sharon gave her the strength and ability to take care of her siblings.

Beatrice’s niece, Sarah Ward, was the last person to see her alive. The night she disappeared, Sarah saw Beatrice walking on Main Street in Winnipeg with a man she later found out was a retired police officer. Beatrice never went anywhere without telling people her whereabouts and when she did not return to her niece’s house the next day, Sarah tried to file a missing persons report with the Winnipeg Police Service. The police asserted that Beatrice could not be considered a missing person until she had been gone for one week and refused to accept the report.

The night before Beatrice’s body was found, she came to her great-niece Sharon Ward. Sharon woke up in the middle of the night and saw Beatrice standing there; it was her spirit. Beatrice was telling Sharon that she was going home, to which Sharon replied, “See you in Brokenhead.” Beatrice said, “I’m not going to Brokenhead. I’m going home.” Sharon knew that Beatrice was gone.

Beatrice’s body was found that evening, May 14, 1974, by three children who were friends of the family. Her niece Sarah was told by police that Beatrice must have gotten dizzy and fallen over the Marion Street Bridge. They contended that her clothes were torn off when the river current beat her body against rocks. Her clothing was never found.

It was not until Sharon reached adulthood that she learned the truth about Beatrice’s death. She was researching facts about missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Manitoba when she came across her grandmother’s name. As she read the report, Sharon recalls, “It was like my mind left my body. I had to sit there and try and try and control the tears.”

Sharon was shocked to discover that much of the information stated in the police report ran contrary to what she and other family members knew about Beatrice’s death. Sharon and her cousin Roselyn Tait were told that their Granny was beaten to death under a bridge and were surprised to read that her cause of death was listed as asphyxiation. Although Beatrice had sustained injuries inflicted by a person, including being unclothed and dragged and dumped under a bridge, according to the report those injuries “were not serious enough to cause death.”

The most shocking part of the report, however, was that Beatrice was found with an abnormally high blood alcohol level of .288. In all of the time that she spent with her grandmother, Sharon has no recollection of Beatrice ever being drunk. Sharon does not remember Beatrice having a drink or going to a party. Beatrice was always with her grandchildren.

Beatrice's grandchildren do not feel that her memory is being honoured the way it should. There are no pictures to tell the story of the beautiful and strong grandmother from the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. Reports suggest that Beatrice was living in Winnipeg when in reality she had homes in Brokenhead and at the time of her death was only in Winnipeg to visit her sister Pearl Olson (Sarah Ward's mother). Above all, the hardest thing for Sharon and her cousins to deal with is not knowing what happened to their grandmother. It has been over 30 years since her death and Beatrice's grandchildren have come to terms with the possibility that this murder likely never will be solved. But that does not stop them from looking for answers to ease their minds and, most importantly, to give their grandmother the acknowledgement and respect that she deserves.

Beatrice taught her grandchildren to respect the people who come through your door; they are there to visit you, so you must give them that time. Beatrice was not given the same respect in death as she offered those around her in life. Beatrice and her teachings live on in the form of her grandchildren, their children and generations to come that will always have a piece of Granny Beatrice.

This story is based on Sharon Bruyere's personal experiences with her grandmother. She encourages other members of Beatrice's family to share their stories as well.