**Natalie Weyaus Growing Up on the Reservation**

My parents’ families lived in the Mille Lacs area during the time of Indian removal, when people were being moved to White Earth.  They were one of the families who stayed behind.  The families who didn’t like it at White Earth came back to Mille Lacs.  That’s when they received the allotted land just north of where Grand Casino Mille Lacs is today.

I come from a big family.  I’m the middle child, with four younger siblings and five older siblings.  My mom and dad were always speaking Ojibwe, but they never taught us.  We understood it a little from hearing it all the time.  My older brother and sister are fluent in Ojibwe; they learned it because they spent a lot of time with my dad’s family, who was very traditional.

When people talk about old times, they always talk about our families being poor.  But we weren’t.  We always had something to eat, and we were never cold.  We would heat the house with wood.  I remember my brothers and dad would go out in the woods after school and cut wood.  My sisters and I would go get the wood and haul it home.  It gave us something to do.  We never complained about it – it was fun.

When we were little, we would gather birch bark off the trees and make birch bark canoes and containers.  We would sometimes make drums too.  The trading post would buy them from us and sell them to the tourists.  That’s how we made money in the spring and summer.

I went to the reservation school for grades 1-6.  My two older sisters and a lot of other girls from the reservation were sent to St. Benedict's, a boarding school for girls in grades 7-12.   I went to St. Benedict’s for 7th and 8th grade, but I didn’t want to go back after that.  I transferred to Onamia High School, which is where I graduated.

I remember when I was in elementary school, every spring there would be a picnic when the whole community would get together.  We would have races for all different ages to see who could run the fastest.  The ladies would have a contest to see who could kick their shoes the farthest.  They would also recognize the students with perfect attendance.  I had perfect attendance from grades 1-4.

In my teenage years, we would go to a field where the Mille Lacs Band’s government center is today, and we would play softball.  The whole community would come.  And we used to go roller-skating in the old Indian Mission gym, or sometimes go to dances there too.

I stop by to see my brother Reginald every now and then and we talk about old times and what we used to do.  I tell him about the stuff he did and he tells my daughter about what I did that I don’t remember.