**Viola Hendren Between Ojibwe and English**

I live in the Twin Cities area, but I come back up to the reservation often now. I didn’t always do that. We moved down to the cities when I was in my early teens, and for many years after that we kind of lost contact with our relatives. I think that’s when we lost our ability to speak Ojibwe.

The funny thing is, Ojibwe was all I spoke up until I went into first grade. I was living with my grandparents, my mother and father, my aunt – it was a very large extended family. And that’s all we spoke.

Entering first grade and not knowing any English at all was difficult. I don’t remember how I did it. But it seems like within a couple years, the Ojibwe started to be erased.

I don’t have pleasant memories of my school years. I had to go to the town school. My sister and I and one other person were the only Indian students at the elementary school. If we spoke our language, we were ridiculed. I can remember the children, my classmates, ridiculing me. And the teacher seeing it but not putting a stop to it. So we just stopped speaking our language and tried to fit in.

The reservation kids had a lot of problems when they reached high school. Most of them, like my sisters, were taunted. They wouldn’t receive any help from their teachers, so their only recourse was to take it or fight back. And when they did fight back, the Indian students were the ones who were expelled. My sister was expelled because she fought back.

I can remember only one teacher who was really good, because she treated all children – Indian or white – the same. But other teachers were not like that.

We used to have a class in English where we would read, and if there was a word that we stumbled on that we couldn’t pronounce, the teacher would have us write it down, look it up in the dictionary, and the next day we would have to read it and give the definition. Most of the time, other students would have three or four words. I would have one, or occasionally none. I think that’s because I’ve always loved to read – even as a young child I would get a book and sit under a tree and read.

One time, the school superintendent brought a visitor to our English class. The teacher said, “I’m going to ask my best student to stand up and read.” I thought, it’s going to be me. But she called on another girl, who stumbled through her reading. And I felt terrible. That’s something I’ve always remembered.

This all happened many years ago. I hope it’s still not happening to Indian children today.