

Living before Yukon: still feisty at 110

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"Mom, Auntie, Gramma or Sister" are the common greetings people express to my mother. I was raised by mom Bella based on Kaska custom and tradition.

Bella Lucy Abou: "Massitto" is her maiden name as she was registered for Catholic Baptism in late 1920s at McDames Post.

She was born to George and Azellabit Massitto along the Kechika River across from Terminus Mountain at the old village site of Gah'tehli and Mattella in the spring of 1894.

Mom always spoke of her grandma Zooly and of the stories she told. Zooly lived to a very old age, as did Azellabit — 103.

Azellabit was registered as Elizabeth. Unknown to mom Bella, her father George's grave at old Fort Graham is now buried by the infamous Williston Lake reservoir.

How do you tell her that such a dishonourable act was to meet a politician's prestige of office as a means to fill B.C.'s hydroelectric demand of the 1970s has justification? It is just too heart-breaking.

During the 1920s, Bella (Crow) met and accepted Jack "Makika" Abou (Wolf) as her lifetime soul mate. He was one of the Kaska who originally taught Skook Davidson during early horse pack train freight hauls about the Kechika Valley country and trail-drive horses into the Terminus Mountain area from the Muskwa.

Subsequently, in the 1930s, Davidson obtained the area as a game guide outfit concession. Sadly, Jack died in August 1969 while walking beside the Alaska Highway on the Liard Reserve.

Makika is the original Kaska name for the currently-known Kechika River. In the English language, Kaska referred to the Makika Tu-eh (river) as Muddy River.

Unfortunately, early government surveyors guided by Kaska Dena mistakenly interpreted Makika to Kechika, as they had also renamed Makika Lake to Weisner Lake. By simple error, government agents have ignored and denied multi-century land-use place names that represent the cultural identity of Kaska Dena.

As Mike Abou tells it, "Abou" is a registration error and the true name is Obo. He explained that Jack's parents are from the Makika and Obo families.

Mom and Dad lived throughout Kaska land and travelled untold miles by foot trail. They shared food, offered fine moccasins, applied traditional medicine as well as provided guidance, assistance and transported many prospectors, trappers, government agents and new comers with kindness.

Over this time, they harvested a multitude of furs and contributed thousands of dollars in royalty payments to Canada.

Contemporary education literature on social history often ignored the invaluable revenue contributions aboriginal people made from traditional harvest activity. Hundreds of millions of dollars went to federal coffers and paid for public infrastructure projects across Canada. Such funds also assisted national social and economic initiatives, including the financial revenue sharing with the provinces and territories.

Aboriginal people are an important revenue source for Canada, and have been since early trade days. The annual budgets approved by federal cabinet were for the Department of Indian Affairs Pro-



Photo submitted

FROM SNOWSHOES TO SATELLITES — Over the last 110 years, Bella Lucy Abou has witnessed tremendous global change. The southeast Yukon resident is a living testimony to the continuous occupation of the Kaska traditional territory.

gram (including Northern) has its revenue income source from aboriginal trapping, hunting and fishing.

Ironically, democracy by Canada did not allow the aboriginal "person" a right to vote until 1960. This is why Bella is not shy to say she has worked hard through the many years.

Despite the reality that present positive contributions to society by aboriginal people, groups like the Council of Canadian Taxpayer Federation still perpetuate negative views and distort the images on the native community.

Although the Government of Canada provided Bella with 1905 as the date of birth for Old Age Pension purposes, as her children, we understand 1894 as more accurate.

She would tell of her first time meeting "dak'ale da" — white eyes, as non-natives were referred to then. Here, parents were camped near Chee House (tobacco in Kaska language to signify trade at the fur post) along the Kechika River, where two bearded men from Ft. Liard way appeared with horses.

In fear, Bella ran to her father and grabbed his leg, asking, "What is that coming?"

She remembers being about as tall as her father's knee — who stood 6'4", so Mom believes her age at about four years. This narrows the time to about 1898. Present Kaska elders in their eighties and mid-nineties attest to Bella's 110-year age.

George Massitto was not alarmed to see them as he had known of them around McDames and told daughter Bella that the new people will travel by going far north and looking for shiny rock — gold. That same summer, many others were seen also travelling via the Rocky Mountain Trench or Atsi Tunna — Grandfathers' Trail in Kaska.

Bella grew up at a time when Kaska were masters of their land, destiny and culture. Mom is versed in four of five Kaska language dialects. This skill represents the land area covered and reflects the keenness in communication with neighbouring Kaska Dena.

Through continuous learning, training and traditional education work, Bella's perseverance enabled her to meet many survival challenges by age 12.

Mom knew hunting techniques, food preparation, natural medicine use, family structure and Kaska organization, land-use history and practices, clothing preparation, Kahta Yehdi — God's word, survival craft making and child care, to list some obvious demands.

Bella truly enjoys being out on the land, or "in the bush no beta than town." Often her sewing skills would provide food staples from the local stores.

Many place names come to mind which Mom has fond memories of like Grassy Lake (head water of the Liard River), Kada Tu (Hyland), Gacho (Turnagin), Denetia, Wudzih Zus (Caribou Hide), Wudzih Tse (Horse Range Mountain), Katsheeya (McDames), Tahkaje Tu (Frog), Ma'tella, Gataga, Nch,tsun (Nelson Lake) Kwadacha and Indini Gah (Ingenika). Her family travels were mostly by foot, dogsled and sometimes horses or moose skin boat.

Up until 1967, Bella's nursing knowledge and skills assisted the birth of numerous babies.

Along with Dad, she worked as lead role to prepare and construct a moosehide boat, in a 1966 movie called *High, Wild and Free* for renowned outdoor filmmaker Gordon Eastman.

About the last time Mom tanned a moosehide was in 1983. She kept sewing for a couple of years later as her eyesight would allow. She was proud to say, "I got Grade 3" from the priest at McDames who taught half-days in June during the 1920s.

Bella and husband Jack took up a more permanent residence on Liard Reserve at Dailiyu (Lower Post, B.C.) in the 1950s. This was both because of the Alaska Highway convenience and to be near their children taken to Lower Post Catholic Residential School.

This institution, fenced off from the village, would sometimes allow them visual sight of their children. In later years, weekend home visits were

allowed.

One of Mom's heartbreaks was a house fire at about 1963 when she lost irreplaceable historic photos and personal items left with her by her father and grandmother.

She always spoke proudly of her father's great hunting skills by both muzzle rifle and bow and arrow. Mom would say Old Massitto travelled all over the place to trade fur for supplies; Wrangle, Alaska, Ft. Liard, N.W.T. and down to Macleod Lake, B.C. So was her world.

By Kaska custom, I was raised by Bella and Jack because the Makika are relatives to Ah Tsa (Old Stone, my true great grandfather), as my birth mother was coping with personal difficulties.

I can remember being at bush camps throughout the year living in canvas wall tents with fresh spruce boughs over the ground. There are good memories of sitting in a dogsled with Mom as we travelled Atsie Tunna along the Rocky Mountain Trench.

We often took walks to hunt grouse, rabbit, duck and beaver. During the fall, she would make cranberry jam for bannock and have fat moose meat on drying racks over the campfire.

Mom was quiet and not happy when the church came to take me away to school at the age of five. Women of her generation are people of powerful inner strength and mind.

Bella would share infinite knowledge with her children on many subjects, grandparent stories, Kaska legends and of her own experiences.

It was always a joy to listen to her fireside stories of wildlife encounters. She would also share by narrative of times enjoyed growing up beside the Dease River with many excursions camped up Wudzih Tse (Horse Range Mountains) with her parents.

Mom laughs when she hears the modern use of "Yukon" because in Kaska language, it means "northern lights".

An interesting story Mom retold from her grandma Zooly is when she

was a young girl, the snow and winter returned after the leaves bloomed. In that year, there was no real summer and much wildlife perished, which was followed by human starvation.

Over the century, Bella witnessed tremendous change in technology from snowshoes to satellites.

She is a living testimony to the continuous occupation of the Kaska traditional territory. In her legacy, she has moccasined and lived on the land from Fort Graham, which is now under the water of our man-made Williston Lake, to the great divide at the confluence of the Swift and Rancharia Rivers.

Mom Bella's health has been weakening during the past year, which mean more stays at the Watson Lake Hospital.

Somewhat of a regular lately, all the nurses and caregivers and staff have grown fond of her. Mom loves to have tea visits with them and truly enjoys their kindness.

Her heart strokes have become more regular, yet, with unexplained reasons, she perseveres. It is difficult to see her experience a stroke. With medication and family members nearby, it lends her some measure of comfort.

She now has daily mental disorientation but also speaks clearly of things that took place years ago. When at home beside the Liard River, she really likes to watch through her window for beaver, bear, moose and caribou that often visit the river shore to drink water.

Even with her current condition, she always remembers to talk about Katey Alderson (a health nurse in the early 1990s) who brought real happiness during home visits and spotted Mom with heartfelt attention. Bella is blessed with beautiful granddaughters—Venus, Vianna and Erica, who provide home-care so she doesn't have to be sent away to an elders' home.

Three things Bella always repeats to me are: always keep busy; if someone is hungry, help them; don't lose *kiveh nan* this ground (land), hold onto it and stay together, hard times will come.

For 110, here is to Mother's Day for our delicate but feisty Mom Bella.

Note: There is much more to write about from knowledge held by Bella's remaining family. Included is a poem written by Dave Porter in 1998:

Dene Sister, Mom, Elder, Grandma

Bella is a century old
I walked past her house today
She was looking out her window in
the evening sun

I waved she didn't respond
I thought she didn't see me
Her sight was taken by the river
To a time when the Dene walked as
one on earth

A time when life meant living
When all you needed was carried on
your back
A time when the wolves and the
bears understood what you said

A time when you needed food the
animals gave you their lives
A time when you satisfied your thirst
from wild waters rhythm

A time when you laid on natures bed
of moss, leaves and boughs
A time when you cried with the
moon and laughed with the sun
A time when only the Dene walked
this way ... long after you passed and
forgot, Bella waved.