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315 DUNDAS STREET EAST
TORONTO, ONTARIO
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INTERVIEWER: EVELYN SIT
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- General account of life in residential school.
- Experiences in Toronto.

Evelyn: The following is an interview with Rena Green of Walpole Island. The interview is being conducted in the Goulding Room, on 315 Dundas Street East, on June 28, 1983, by Evelyn Sit.

Evelyn: When and where were you born?

Rena: I was born in Walpole Island, 1925.

Evelyn: What is the origin of your name? Your name is Rena Green.

Rena: Yes.

Evelyn: What does it mean?

Rena: Rena Green, Rena means "born again".

Evelyn: And did you have a native name? How big was your

family?

Rena: I had four sisters and one brother.

Evelyn: What are their names?

Rena: Eh?

Evelyn: Your brothers and sisters, what are their names?

Rena: Well there was Eleanor, Gladys, me, Ella May, Doris, and my brother's name was Martin, but he's dead.

Evelyn: What was your home like?

Rena: It was nice, really nice, I liked it. We were living on the island.

Evelyn: Which island?

Rena: Walpole Island.

Evelyn: And what reserve? What's the reserve's name?

Rena: Walpole Island.

Evelyn: And do you know how it got it's name?

Rena: No.

Evelyn: How were the children treated in your family?

Rena: Oh, fair.

Evelyn: What were the roles of men, women, and children in your family?

Rena: I don't know anything about roles. At that time, I was small. I went to school when I was ten -- to Sault Ste. Marie -- at the boarding school there. At Shigwalk(?) school I went there.

Evelyn: You went to boarding school?

Rena: Yeah.

Evelyn: How was the school like?

Rena: Oh nice, there was sleeping quarters, there was schools to go to school in, classrooms. Then later on they taught us how to wash dishes, cook, and sweep the floors, scrub the floors.

Evelyn: What were your teachers like?

Rena: Oh, I liked all my teachers. I didn't do anything

about... We had matrons to put us to bed, get us up in the morning and dress us, make our bed, get washed, go downstairs and have our breakfast. We had our breakfast, dinner, supper there. We stayed right there all the time. Stayed there for six years.

Evelyn: Did you ever get to go home?

Rena: Yes, in the summertime.

Evelyn: Did you find it different when you went home?

Rena: No. I liked it... summer holidays.

Evelyn: Were you, were you allowed to speak your native language?

Rena: No. Sometimes, odd times we did talk native language between ourselves, but not in front of the staff because they wouldn't let us.

Evelyn: And how were you treated as a native? Were there a lot of native children there?

Rena: Oh yes, there was all kinds of them. From all over creation.

Evelyn: Were there a lot of other children, I mean non-natives?

Rena: Well, some of them were halfbreeds, eh. But still they were quarter-Indian, or native before they'd let them in the school. Some came from Caughnawaga in Quebec... all around there... Montreal. Some were experts(?), you know.

Evelyn: What were you taught specifically?

Rena: Eh?

Evelyn: What were you taught in school?

Rena: Arithmetic, spelling, art, then we learned sewing. There was this old teacher that teach us how to sew, made clothes, darning, darn our socks. They taught me how to make meals there. They help me make meals, warm up a meal for the children. We had three hundred and some odd pupils in the school, boys and girls.

Evelyn: What were the other students like?

Rena: Oh, great. Learned to make friends.

Evelyn: How long did you attend school?

Rena: I stayed there six years. I was about fifteen when they took me out. Though I could have stayed longer, but I got a letter from home. See, my mother needed help at home, she was

sick in bed. And when I got there she wasn't there, just my sister was there.

Evelyn: And was this typical of other native children, would they have to go home too?

Rena: Not until they got bigger, got their grades. Well, enough grades, there was grade six.

Evelyn: Did any of the children play any native games?

Rena: I guess they did. I don't know. I wasn't...

Evelyn: Did you play any native games yourself?

Rena: Like what?

Evelyn: Uh, I don't know what an Indian game might be.

Rena: Oh, we just played whatever they taught us in school.

Evelyn: Do you know your ancestral history?

Rena: Just my grandmother and grandfather. My grandmother used to like being around the biggest (inaudible) when I was small.

Evelyn: And your grandfather?

Rena: I didn't know my grandfather.

Evelyn: Did you ever hear any stories about your grandfather, or grandmother?

Rena: Oh, my grandmother she was alive. She looked after me when I was little, about like that.

Evelyn: How old?

Rena: Four or five years old. But my grandfather died. He got drowned in the river there, Lake St. John's, Little John's, the lakes.

Evelyn: And did you ever hear any stories about your grandfather?

Rena: No.

Evelyn: Or did your grandmother ever talk about her childhood to you?

Rena: No.

Evelyn: Do you know the name of your tribe?

Rena: Ojibway.

Evelyn: Ojibway?

Rena: Yes.

Evelyn: And what does it mean?

Rena: I don't know what it means.

Evelyn: How big was your community?

Rena: You mean at home?

Evelyn: Yeah. How many people?

Rena: I don't know.

Evelyn: Was there over two hundred? Yes?

Rena: Yes.

Evelyn: Can you describe your reservation?

Rena: Oh. There was some cottages there, you know. You see the cottages, they were renting them. But I think the cottages now... White people were renting the cottages.

(END OF SIDE A)

Evelyn: What kind of festivals did you have?

Rena: We had the powwow and there was dancing, Indian war-dancing, and made baskets, sold them. Axe handles need work, and we made bannock, and corn soup, salad, and some other stuff. We'd have people and we had popcorn.

Evelyn: What did kids do during this festival?

Rena: Play around. Listen to the music.

Evelyn: What happened in the Indian war-dances?

Rena: Dancing.

Evelyn: Do you remember any of the music?

Rena: No, I don't know how to dance.

Evelyn: Do you remember any of the songs?

Rena: No.

Evelyn: And what other festivals did you have?

Rena: Uh, they had, one time we had, this boat was coming out of a bush, when there was no water there, it was on the trailer, like, type.

Evelyn: Wheels, yeah.

Rena: There was wheels underneath and they were pushing the wheels, pushing the boat over that way. I don't know what it was all about. Anyway they were watching this boat come out of the bush.

Evelyn: Did you find out later why it came out of the bush? What was the reason?

Rena: That was one of them, one of them powwows they had there. I don't know what year it was though.

Evelyn: Did you know anything about the process of trapping animals?

Rena: They use ordinary traps. We had muskrat, and rabbit, jack rabbit.

Evelyn: And how were these traps made out of?

Rena: Eh?

Evelyn: How were these traps made out of?

Rena: We got them from town, Village Slick, in Wallaceburg, bought them by the dozen. They were made out of steel, and you have to thrust the thing in order to have that come open like that and set the trap, and you set it down easy. Whenever the animal comes along they step on that, well they can't go anyplace. They're right there until we come along.

Evelyn: What was your basic diet?

Rena: Oh, just like what we have today. Potatoes, and corn, carrots, cabbage. We had wild game like muskrat, and rabbit, venison, fish.

Evelyn: Anything else?

Rena: We had Indian corn, we had corn soup. Sometimes we had wild honey from the trees, my dad would bring it home. Strawberries, wild strawberries, blueberries.

Evelyn: What made you move to Toronto?

Rena: Oh, I come across this girl. She asked me to come with her, pay her way, pay her way back here since her money was gone; so she knew I had money in my pocket so she asked me

to pay her way back here. So I came with her, stayed at her place for a while; then we got kicked out and the only place I knew to go to was colored lady, over on Broadview, Sister Harris. Well, I went over there, we stayed at her place for a while so she helped her out, because I had two small children. Her and her friend got together with somebody and they paid for this place where we could stay, they told us three weeks, till we got kicked out of there so she helped us get a room down the street there on Broadview; got two bedrooms and a kitchen for a \$100. a month. So we went down there. It was a nice place, two bedrooms and a kitchen.

So Mrs. Redman, I don't know how come she got in touch with me. And my girls wouldn't sleep in their own way down near the toilet. Our room was in the front like, you know, second floor. When you go this way you go into the kitchen, and you come this way down the hallway there's a washroom there, and there was bedroom in the back where Dorothy was supposed to sleep. Oh heck, she was only about four, five years old at the time. She says, "Mother, I don't want to sleep over there," she says, "I'm scared." So she crawled in bed beside me and oh there was one here, and one here, I was in the middle. I don't know what time it was in the night, anyway that landlady was coming, throw the door open and see what's going on and we were all in bed sleeping. So she knew we were all together in the one bed, so she, a couple of days after she returned, her two girls got together and they got this bed from outside somewhere. It's a little day bed, you know. A little bit rusty, but what the heck. It was a bed, so she sat that up there, for Dorothy, just in by the window. There was a big double bed here and just put it by the window there, girls are sleeping.

So I'm down of all things I had to get this down the street this way, there was that great big place there, Health Community Centre, like where the Board of Health was. We went over there so this lady says to us we have to get that girl to

school. So we just down the street from there this way, and over there there was a school house there and I had to get my girl start the school over there. So Dorothy went to school there. She was so small. She was gone in the afternoon, gone out to play with some children, you know, her friends. And I was wondering where my girl was, so I had to get someone to go look for her including the police. I had to get them, told them that she was gone till they brought her home. They found her way down there by that Donmon Courts, way down around the corner this way, playing around there. Twice she went like that.

Evelyn: Did you interact?

Rena: Eh?

Evelyn: Did you interact with Indians at all when you were in Toronto?

Rena: Well, Mrs. Redman got a hold of me after she knew I had a spare bedroom, so she got this girl to come and, come to my place and then was able to rent this room out, eh. And I got some money from this girl, she paid three week's rent in... She stayed there for a few days, three or four days and then she was gone, maybe ten days, like, she stayed there, a week or ten days. And I looked for her again, she wouldn't, I didn't know where to look for her and then she got in cahoots with another guy, because she had some money in her pocket, like \$5. or something like that. Guess she went and bought some wine for this guy and they went to a room. First thing you know she was in the hospital. He must have kicked her in the stomach, eh. She was bleeding internally so they had to rush to the hospital, you see.

Evelyn: What was your first impression of Toronto when you came here?

Rena: I was, she had to get an operation on her to stop that bleeding. She had three, three operations, two operations and then going on to the third one when she took a heart attack, she died. I went and seen her twice, once or twice in the hospital before she died. I went to her funeral, too. I really liked that girl, just took her as my sister.

Evelyn: What was your first impression of Toronto when you came here?

Rena: Oh, I thought it was a real nice place to live. It was rather noisy with all the traffic and that, you know, but sometimes you find it quiet. On Sundays the traffic ain't so loud, you know. Nice day like today, little bit of a breeze. I always went to church when I first come around here, I always to the closest church I can ever go to. And then I started to go to church out here.

Evelyn: Was this, you said it was a great city, but did you miss home? Did you miss the reserve at all?

Rena: No. I intended to leave the city, I mean my reserve. Got over there, I got people there, bad people. (laughs)

Evelyn: So you purposely wanted to leave the reserve, you didn't like the reserve life?

Rena: No, I never did get married on the reserve to begin with; I couldn't find anybody that would marry me so that's why I turned around and married a white man; therefore lost all my

reserve, all my rights to the reserve. On top of all things I was disenfranchised. So therefore now, if I want to go back into the reserve, I have to marry in before they'll take me as a member.

Evelyn: So when you, you said that no Indian would take you, how did males and females interact? What was the marriage courting process?

Rena: Oh, I said, I never attracted no Indian. (laughs) I don't know what they thought of me at that time, I never got married on the reserve, like after I got here I got married right away. I got married to this, got married to a evangelist. He was a churchgoing man and a Christian, but I didn't last with him either. Sort of broke off, broke up right away -- he divorced me so I married another guy. That's why my name is Green now.

Evelyn: So...

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