HIGHLIGHTS:

- General reminiscences of her life in the Mission Indian Residential School.

Margaret: Did you ever get any sense of love from the Sisters?

Mary:  There was a couple of Sisters that really showed their affection, in fact whenever I used to... Her name was Sister Mary Andre. Whenever I met her in the hall she'd put her arms around me and she really showed that she, she was a happy-go-lucky person. And then there was our teacher, Sister Mary Hildegard -- I think she's still alive. You see, you were privileged if you could go downtown with the Sisters if they had something to do downtown; to go and mail letters or go and pay bills or go and do things downtown. And you were privileged if you were chosen to go with the Sister, you see, and she's... We'd go downtown and you see you were not to touch them but the minute we got outside the door and out the yard, you know, she'd hold my hand. Oh, it was really a privilege, you know, it was really nice. Those were the only two. The others too, you know, they'd say, "Hello," and, "How are you?" and they were very nice in a way, you know. But that
Sister Veronica I'll never forget, she was a... (laughs) She'd be nice in her way, you know, but she made up for it in a lot of ways too. We all, I think everybody hated her. Everybody hated her. And then when the principal came over -- Father Rob -- you see, he was French too, they'd sit and talk French and we knew very well they were talking about us, all of us, and we resented that very much. They wouldn't allow us to talk Indian but they could talk French. We used to tell her that, "How come you can talk French in front of us and you won't allow us to talk Indian in front of you?" And of course she'd get after us for that.

Margaret: You weren't allowed to question?

Mary: You weren't allowed to question. Oh yeah, they weren't very nice in that respect, you know.

Margaret: When you were saying earlier about going in the church with veils on, was this because the boys were in church as well?

Mary: It was tradition. It was tradition. You wore white veils. You were not allowed to go in the chapel or the church without something on your head. So we wore veils. And on special occasions we wore, had great big veils that came down, you know. That was all folded and put away and put out at certain days. You wore that and you had uniforms to go with those and we thought that was great to wear a great big long veil. You were an angel or something, you know. They were pinned in our hair and they had to stay there. Oh my. But I guess it was a way of teaching you respect and teaching you discipline of some sort to respect and you were not to look around. But there were little instances as you come in the church because the boys sat on one side and we sat on the other, and it got so the older girls, the minute you'd come in, certain boy would (imitates boy's cough) and of course some girl would answer. Finally, you know, the nuns would catch when we went home. "Who was that that did that?" And of course nobody didn't dare tell. No, you were a tattletale if you told.

Margaret: There was no communication with the boys?

Mary: No. None whatsoever. You were not to talk to a boy unless it was your brother. And you were not to have any way of showing any kind of signs or anything to a boy unless it was your brother. You could go up and say hello and talk to him, you know. Outside of that you hold your ground. So I tell you one funny little instance. As we got older there we all... See, we all had our clique, certain ones we were all friends, you know, and we all worked together, and Sisters know that and they'd send you to do certain jobs. So this one Tuesday morning we all were ironing in the laundry, you see, and everything had to be starched and ironed just perfect, you see.
So we didn't quite finish when the dinner bell rang so we went over and had dinner and we asked the Sister that stayed with us could we go and finish the ironing. She said, "Fine." So of course she sat right by the window to see over to the laundry -- was quite a little way, I think, from here to that white house, I guess (pointed through window to neighbor's house). So she could see if there was anything going on and attaching the laundry was a high fence and behind that fence was where the boys use to chop wood for the kitchen stove, our kitchen stove. And if there was any boys in there you weren't allowed in the laundry. But anyway we went to finish the laundry and she asked us as we were leaving the recreation room, "Was there any boys out in the woodshed?" We said, "No." So when we got to the laundry we said, "We'll fix her. We'll show her if there's any boys behind there, we'll fix her." So we got one of the girls -- she was quite small, she was a husky little thing, you know. And there was always boys' clothes laying around -- laundry, you see. So we got her and we dressed her as a boy, put a cap and everything, stuck her hair up in a cap and we put it on her and we put her out the back window to go around to get into the shed and then just as Sister looked... Of course, they used to make us go out in the ground and clean our irons, you know. They had a great big handle irons where they attach onto. We'd go and clean that on the gravel and then come in again, wipe it and start ironing again. Just as we were outside doing that she came out of the shed -- you see a great big door in this big high fence. Just as the Sister looked out the window she came running in and into the laundry, you see, and there we went in after her. And oh boy, this girl came running over to want to see where that boy was, and we had to hustle to get her undressed again. She was still standing there with these pants on the floor, you see, and I had the cap behind my back and somebody else got the coat and I dunno what else they got and we were all standing there, holy looking as anything. (laughs) And this girl came over, she says, "Sister wants to know where that boy is and who was that boy." We said, "There's no boy here." So she ran upstairs and went in every room all over and then she went back over there to tell the Sister, you see. And by this time we were all busy ironing, you know.

And I was an awful girl to laugh if there was anything going on like that. All the other girls they were sullen, you see. There was one, two, three, four, we were five of us in there and I was ironing away and of course Sister came over, she says... None of these other girls didn't dare speak, you see. They didn't dare say a word. They were scared, you know, out of their boots. Of course, I started to laugh, you see. I couldn't help myself. It wasn't her I was laughing at, I was laughing at this girl -- how funny she looked getting out of the clothes. (laughs) How funny she looked in this cap and these pants -- it was those knickers, you know. Oh, she looked really funny and of course I started to laugh when she said, "That isn't funny and you keep silence tonight at supper time." And I told her then, I said, "Sister, there's no boy. There was no boy here." "Well who was that that came in then?" Then
I told her, I said, "We dressed up Martina to look like a boy and we put her out the back window just to tease you." Oh was she ever annoyed! We lost our notes for that that month.

So there you see we were not allowed, under no circumstances, to look at a boy, to talk at a boy or to have a boy come over wherever we are or us go over wherever they are. We were kept completely isolated from one another. And I don't know if that was good or not. So every summer when the girls went home they all had boyfriends, which was natural, yeah, when we got older, of course. I know I had two or three boyfriends when I went home. (laughs) Of course they couldn't see me, they couldn't do anything. But if they ever heard about it we sure heard about it when we went back to the school. Whatever we did outside the school when we went home -- if it wasn't just what it should be -- we heard about it we got back to the school. We were punished for it.

Margaret: So people would tell them even when you were at home? People would report?

Mary: Oh, some of the girls that went to school with you, saw you in the village with so-and-so, you know, if they had anything against you or felt jealous of you in any way, you know, they'd tell the Sister and there you go, you see, get reprimanded for it. But I was lucky, there was nobody else from my village, just me. (laughs)

Margaret: So you had the run of the place?

Mary: Oh...

Margaret: Did you ever manage to make contact with your boyfriends in spite of the rules?

Mary: No. No, you couldn't. I believe maybe some of the girls did. I think they did. Because I tell you one instance that where another thing happened what was, we thought at the time, was terrible. The boys were cleaning the eaves. You know, they'd get full of moss and they were cleaning and there was great big long ladders put up, you see. And this one ladder was left at the end of the building and that was going into the lavatories where the toilets were. And the windows were able to be opened, screens could be taken off and opened. Apparently a bunch of the boys had decided that they were going to go over to the convent and raid the girls' dormitory. And I think there was four or five of them that -- quite big boys, you know -- and they got into the dormitory about midnight.

Margaret: By using the ladder?

Mary: By using the ladder. And they came in through the washroom, you see, come through the toilets and we never... And they got way down. The dormitory sleeping fifty girls is quite a large place and away in one corner the nun slept, you
see. She had her little caboose, we called it, walled off room, she had a room there. And they got away down the middle of the dormitory and they were waking some of the girls up, you see. And in those days when you're young, you know, you're scared of anything in the dark. Of course there was dim lights all over the dormitory but you couldn't see very well and one of the girls then she was so scared she crawled on the floor and went and knocked at the nun's door, you see. And by this time, you see, they got suspicious. This one boy he was trying to crawl in bed with one of the girls, you see, and she was trying to push him off the bed. And then the nun came out, you see, and they all took off and ran down the stairs, you see. Oh no, they went down through the ladder again. And the Sister opened the trap door, you see, and one boy he was still in the middle of the dormitory. And they had blackened their faces so they wouldn't be seen, you see, and we were all... By this time the light was put on, you see, and I was, I remember I was sitting on my bed and trying to talk to the girl across the way from me and these two were still asleep and I woke them up and we were all talking because the Sister had gone downstairs to tell Sister Superior, you see. And all at once as we looked up this black thing came up at the foot of my bed. I hollered and I pulled my blanket and my feet were sticking... (laughs) And he went downstairs, you see, he didn't... I don't know how he got out but he went downstairs. They were all in their stocking feet so they weren't... They were big boys too. Oh, that was something. It was tragic in a way and yet it was funny, you know. And all you could see was their white teeth and their eyes. (laughs)

Margaret: Did they get away with it?

Mary: Oh no, oh no. We had a new Father Superior by this time and they got strapping. And the girls, of course, they got blamed for enticing the boys to come over. I don't know whether they did or not. I know I didn't have anything to do with it. Some of the girls apparently were getting familiar with the boys so they decided they were going to go and visit the girls. (laughs)

Margaret: Well, they had guts anyway.

Mary: Oh they were, yeah, you could call them gutsy. (laughs) Oh, that was another funny instance when I was in school. But oh my, every time you heard a noise after that, "There's some other boy coming." We made sure the windows were locked then, you know. There were two sections to every window and there was a little latch on top you locked. Yeah, we had... it was a good life in a way. You made your life in a place like that, you know. You were more, well, you were kept so secluded anything was a pleasure to have, you know. If you were allowed to stay up in the evening until nine o'clock it was a great gift.

Margaret: But when you went home for the holidays it must have
Mary: Not really, not really, because like the girls from all along the Fraser Valley from (inaudible), Sardis, Chilliwack, Lytton, they all went a day or two ahead of us. They all had their suitcases and the clothes that they come to school with -- they wore that to go home, you see. They took their suitcases and away they got on... They were taken down onto the station and put on the train and they were gone. And the next day it was our turn, those that went the long way. There the priest, generally Father Rob, would go with us. We got all ready and we'd get up real early in the morning. We had to be at the train I think about eight o'clock or seven o'clock; it was real early. So we all marched down to the station, you see, with Father Rob ahead of the parade. (laughs) Got down there and I guess he must get the tickets for the whole band and then we'd get on the train and that's when the noise started. (laughs)

Margaret: No controls any more.

Mary: Oh, he went all the way home with you?

Mary: Oh, we had to be... We had to stay but we could talk and we could have a boy sit with us if we wanted. We were all mixed then, you see, until we'd get to Vancouver. Then we were taken off the train and marched down to the pier. We used to have to go across from Vancouver to Squamish by boat, you see. Then we went on the boat, were put on the boat, Father Rob at the head of the parade and we'd all march down.

Margaret: Oh, he went all the way home with you?

Mary: Oh, he went all the way as far as he could for us. Train used to come just as far as Lillooet then and he went with us all along. We were able to mix with the boys then on the boat and on the train and then we packed lunch from the school. We didn't stop to eat anywhere, we were making sandwiches the day before and packed, each one packed a lunch. We didn't have anything to drink, we just took water that was on the train. But we all... I remember we always had baloney sandwiches and we though those were great, you know. We would slice that great big rolls of baloney and be slicing that and making sandwiches. No butter. Just pieces of bread and the baloney, that was great just the same.

Margaret: Did you feel uncomfortable when you went home after the school?

Mary: You did. You missed the companionship of the others. You felt alone. Although the family was there, my brothers were there, my older brother, my uncle, my grandmother -- we always had one uncle live with us because he was blind. But you were lonely, you know. At least I was and children on the reserve were not of your... Oh they were people, you know, but they weren't like the ones you had in the convent. So it was different. You talked to them, they were nice to you, they wanted to know what the school was all about. And we'd go
swimming... Things were different, but mother, bless her, she always tried to make life easier for us. We'd help her. She always had a garden, we'd use the garden and then when we got through, of course... We always had horses too. The horses were saddled and we packed up lunch and we went hiking up. We took the horses, we went up in the hills picking berries and we spent our holidays that way. We'd come down and then we'd get ready, you know, before we went back to school. Then there was washing and ironing and getting ready and bathing and hair washing, and oh, I don't know what not, and then we'd hit the train. Used to get on the train but we never felt as though we were leaving somebody that we loved. We were glad to get away. Wasn't that something? I never realized until after my mother died that I really loved her, that I would miss her, you know. We got on that train, we were anxious to get on that train. We were anxious to be off and on our way. We never thought that, well, maybe we should say good-bye to mother or maybe she'll feel bad. We'd see her crying but we couldn't understand why. Wasn't that awful? I never realized until after she was gone -- and she died while I was in school, you see. But then we never, we weren't allowed to, you see. Once you had no parents, there was no home to go to, you weren't allowed out of the school. I wasn't allowed out anyway. My brother stayed with my aunt. And my younger brother and myself we stayed in the school. Then they allowed us visiting privileges between my brother and myself. Well we'd visit every week, maybe once or twice a week.

Margaret: It was like you were orphans or something.

Mary: Yes, we were, we were.

Margaret: But you did have family though?

Mary: We did have family at home. I had my brother at home. But after my mother died we weren't allowed to go home, you see. We weren't even allowed to go to the funeral. Which hurt me very much because I was old enough to understand. So there I was kind of left with my two brothers to look out for when my mother died. My one brother was a year younger, two years younger than me, and the little one he was just about eight or ten years old. So we had to look after one another. And I was there for just two years after, I was about sixteen then when the principal came over one day. He thought, well, I had gone as far as I could go. In those days the grades weren't as high as the public schools were. If you were in grades five and six you were equal to grade eight and ten in the public schools in those days and I was in grade six. Five one year and two years in five and then six because they put me there because they didn't know what to do with me. So that's where I stayed, you see. And I could have gone to high school or finished school anywhere but I wasn't allowed to because that high as I was going to go. That's as high as Indian girls went. Outside of that you worked around the convent if you
stayed there. You did the cooking, you did the washing, you
did the supervising if you wanted to stay at the convent. You
didn't get paid for it though. So anyway this principal came
over -- we'd got a new principal by this time -- his name was
Father John Duplennd. And him and Father Hartman came over one
day and they said, "You've been... you're no good to the school
any more and you can't go any higher so you may as well go out.
And there's a lady in Ladner that would like a girl to keep
house for her, and she'll teach you how to cook. She'll look
after you." She was an elderly... she was very... Well, she
was old as far as I was concerned. She was eighty-three years
old. And she was a well-to-do woman. She had lots of money,
she had a beautiful home. So they took me down there.

Margaret: Did you want to go?

Mary: I didn't know what I was getting into. The money was
more fascinating to me because I knew I'd have money to be able
to do something with my brothers, to be able to give them nice
clothes and I would be able to buy nice clothes. I was told
I'd get thirty-five dollars a month. Oh, it was big money in
those days, but I never did. I never got no more than twenty
dollars a month when I got there. It was just to get me there,
you see, when I got there... And I used to cry because Ladner
was, oh, worlds away from where I'd been. And being with a
bunch of girls all those years, well pretty near ten years, and
then to go and live with this cranky old woman was just
ridiculous.

And she was just more strict than the nuns were, you see. She
was Scotch. And oh, she had high blood pressure and she had
arthritis. She couldn't walk properly, she just dragged her
foot when she walked, and you had to wait on her hand and foot.
I'd get up in the morning and make breakfast for her, take it
up to her in her bed, you know, and wash the dishes and go back
and dress her again, comb her hair for her and everything. I
was there for a year and she took sick. She had pneumonia and
pluerisy and the doctor used to come from Vancouver and she had
trained nurses to come look after her and she was so miserable
they didn't last. One lasted three days and another one lasted
another three or four days and she took off. And then the
elderly nurse came along she was supposed to be a graduate
nurse and she was quite -- she was in her late fifties. She
was an old woman as far as I was concerned then. She stayed
ten days and she left.

So I had to do all the work. Looking after her and I'd sit up
all night, she had a kettle by her bed with Friar's Balsam in
it and I had to keep that filled and I'd sit by her bed all
night long. Very little sleep. It got towards spring I took
sick, so when the doctor came over he ordered me out of there,
told me to go to a drier... Ladner's very damp, so he told me
to go to a drier climate for two or three weeks. Well I came
up here and I never went back. (laughs) She sent the two
priests after me but I told them I'd go back next week, but I
never did go back because that twenty dollars a month didn't...

Margaret: Seem important?

Mary: Seem important to me. My health was more important. And then another thing it was during the summer holidays. I had my brothers out with me, you see. They needed me more than she needed me, because they were my responsibility now that my mother was gone. So we lived here with my older brother then, you see. He was working on the section and he kept us.

Margaret: Did the Sisters ever try to persuade you to become a nun?

Mary: No. I wanted to be a nun and I spoke to them about it but you see you had... your father and mother had to be married and you had to produce their wedding certificate and you had to have a certain amount of money. Otherwise you, it was useless. You might as well go talk to the wall. I wanted very much to be a nun.

Margaret: Why?

Mary: I don't know why. It fascinated me somehow and I wanted very, very much to be a nun.

Margaret: Did you understand what you were going to be getting into?

Mary: Oh, they explained it to me. Sister Bernadette -- she was our Mother Superior there for a while -- I told her. So she says, "You know you can't get married, you can't have children." I said I didn't want any. I wanted to be a nun. She says, "What would you rather do if you become a nun?" I says, "Anything they put me to. I like to sew, I like to cook." But I couldn't play the piano so she started teaching me to play the organ.

Margaret: How old were you at that time?

Mary: I was, oh, I was about fifteen then. I wanted very much to become a nun. But then she told me, she says, "Well do you think you can produce your, can you find your father and mother's marriage certificate? Did you know your father and mother have to be married in the church?" Which they weren't. They just lived together. I told her they weren't married and she says, "You'll need money, you know." And that money meant a lot to me, you see. I didn't have no money. I never even got money from home at times. At times the nuns would get generous enough they'll give you when you go downtown, like at Christmas times, and we'd all march downtown and we'd buy... They'd give us... those that didn't have money we got ten cents. Some of the girls they got money from home, you see, and the nuns would keep it for us. But we never got any, I never got any. We got ten cents. We'd buy a five cent bag of candy and a five cent postcard to send home. So there I was,
you see. I didn't, that was another thing that I rebelled very much against.

Margaret: This bothered you when you couldn't go, for those reasons?

Mary: Yes, for money and because my father and mother weren't married, you see. So I couldn't join, but I still had that desire, you know, to become a nun. I envy the nuns just now, you know. I still would like to have been, you see, and that's one reason why I now, when I have the opportunity to become a leader, I grab the chance.

Margaret: Oh, in the programme? (The Catholic Church's Spiritual Lay Leadership Programme)

Mary: In the programme, in the lay leadership programme, and I often expressed my...

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