



Elders Chair: Theresa Johnston Enjoys Four Seasons Living

Printed in the DeBahJiMon November 2003

Interview and photograph by Patsy Gordon

Her patio door was open inviting in the warm breeze from a beautiful fall day as I walked into her Four Seasons apartment. We sat down at her dining room table as she closed the cover on her "Detect- A-Word" magazine and said to me, "This is what I do to pass the time." I told her that I have always been a fan of crossword puzzles too.

Eighty six year old Theresa was born Theresa Wind on February 11, 1917 to Emma Bear and Levi Wind, Sr. Theresa and her parents and siblings lived in the Lake 13 area in her childhood years where she also started attending grade school in a one room school house there. The more elders I interview, the more I am finding out that most Indian elders of their age never spoke the English language until they started school. The same is true with Theresa. In her later grade school years, her family moved to Cass Lake where she attended school through the 10th grade. She finished her 11th year at Flandreau High School in South Dakota.

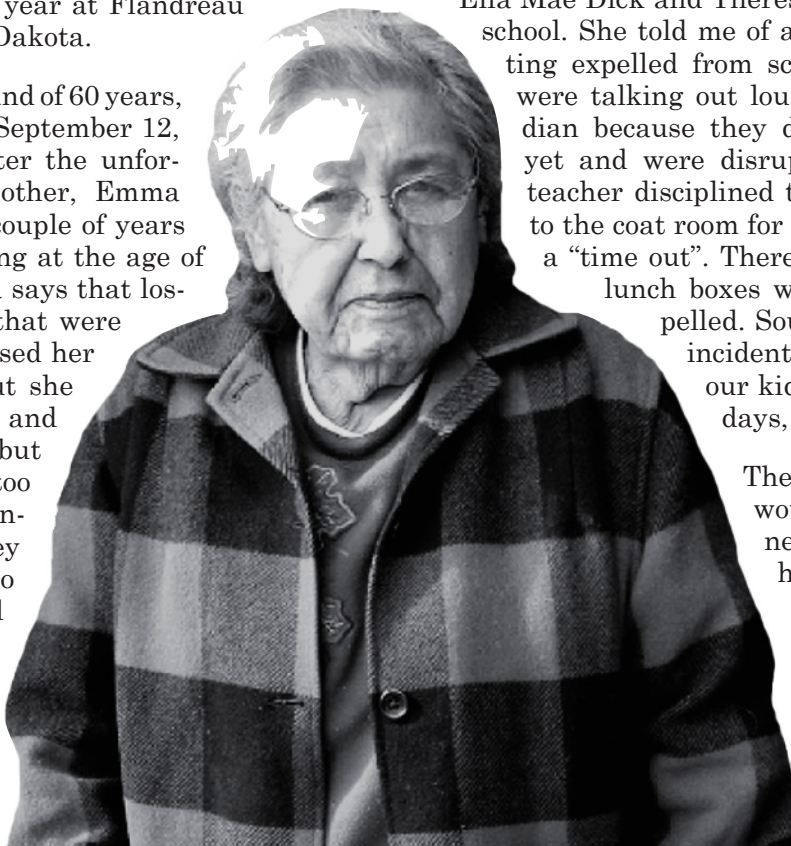
Theresa lost her husband of 60 years, Charles Johnston, on September 12, 2001, the morning after the unforgettable 9/11. Her mother, Emma Bear, passed away a couple of years prior to Charles passing at the age of 103 years old. Theresa says that losing these two people that were so dear to her has caused her a lot of loneliness. But she says her kids come and check up on her a lot but she says, "They're too bossy!" She made mention of the fact that they are always wanting to feed her. She will tell them, "I just ate and besides I'm too fat." She said they still want to feed her any-

way. I told her, "Well, those are your kids, and that's just because they love you." She said, "Yes, I know." She had a crock pot of stew sitting on her counter-top cooking that her daughter, Polly, had come and made for her that morning. She pointed out the tomato plant that sat out on her small patio that had given in to the cold temperatures we've had lately. She proudly told me that "William brought that over here for me and I got 8 tomatoes off from it!" Although she misses her home of many years where she lived with her husband and raised her children, she enjoys the company of her friends at Four Seasons.

It sounded and looked like her children do a fine job of caring for her. Charles and Theresa had 7 kids, 1 boy and 6 girls. Theresa also has 18 grandchildren and 27 great grandchildren.

Ella Mae Dick and Theresa were best friends in school. She told me of a time about them getting expelled from school. The two friends were talking out loud to each other in Indian because they did not speak English yet and were disrupting the class. Their teacher disciplined them by sending them to the coat room for what we call now days a "time out". Theresa said all of the kids lunch boxes were lined up were expelled. Sounds like a very minor incident compared to what our kids get expelled for now days, doesn't it?

Theresa said that she would always want to sit next to her brother and he didn't want her to. He would get mad at her and tell her, "You are too mischievous". He told their mother, "Mom, she's crazy!"



Theresa said that her and her best friend, Ella Mae, were the “child brats” there. Theresa and Ella Mae made friends with a woman by the name of Mrs. Clark who lived out at Lake 13. She laughed as she said they would visit her a lot because she always fed them.

Theresa spent summers with her grandma, Kay Bay Way, and helped her gather native plants for medicine as her grandma was a midwife and healer in their small Lake Thirteen/Oak Point community. She wondered how her grandma could find turtle eggs just by poking in the sand on the lakeshore and thought to herself, “I’ll never eat those”, but later liked eating them hard boiled. She helped at the maple sugar camp and went with her grandma to the big drum ceremonies that used to be held in the area. Her grampa, Mahquah, died while jigging rice at their wild rice camp. Theresa remembers this at the young age of three and also remembers how her grampa would watch her play with a smile and love in his eyes. She won a dance contest as a little girl and saved her money to show her mom when she got home. She continues to enjoy pow-wows and seeing all the many colors of the regalia, especially the ones she made. She said, “I like to see my beadwork dance by.” She’s known in our community for her beautiful beaded black velvet vests, purses, and baby moccasins. Because Theresa had 6 daughters who wore out dresses quickly, she would use all of the old dresses to make braided rugs from them and told me about how she bought what she called “braiding rags” at the rummage sales she would go to. She recalled how her and her mother would pick blueberries when she was a young girl also. They would can the berries and whenever they had blueberries at a meal, it was a real treat!

Theresa stayed at home until her youngest, who were twins, were in school. After the girls entered school Theresa went to work for the Community Action Program (CAP) as their Health Director and stayed there until she took another job as the Director of the Leech Lake Youth Lodge which she kept until she retired in 1979. She talked several times of her passion of wanting to get a nursing home for Indian elders started back then. She visited many elders in nursing homes during that time and said she wasn’t happy with the conditions of the nursing homes she visited. She sadly said, “I didn’t get anywhere with that.” Theresa’s husband Charles al-

ways had a garden every summer where he planted potatoes and many different kinds of vegetables. Theresa said, “My husband would grow the garden and I would can the vegetables.” She baked bread twice a week or whenever her husband wanted fry bread she would make it for him. I could tell she missed her husband by the way she spoke of him.

Today, Theresa’s favorite past time is doing crosswords, reading and going out to play Bingo. When I asked her what kind of books or magazines she liked to read she said, “Oh anything I can get my hands on, I never watch TV.” The shuttle bus picks her at her apartment in the evening at least once and sometimes twice a week to take her to the Palace to play Bingo. Theresa says, “I like to play Bingo!”

Last week Theresa’s daughter Linda took her out on a road trip to see the leaves turning to their beautiful bright colors. I could again tell how Theresa missed her husband when she recalled her many trips with him taking that same route to see the colors and how they always stopped in Federal Dam to eat lunch at a restaurant there.

Sitting behind me on a table was a pair of unfinished moccasins. I asked Theresa if she beaded. She said, “My mother told me that you have to wear moccasins when you leave this world.” She was making her own moccasins in preparation for that time. Theresa had already made herself a pair but some lady wanted them and talked her out of them. Theresa said, “So now I’m making myself another pair.” It brought back memories of my own mother being laid to rest in her moccasins too. ■

