

“Everything from our hearts to our hockey sticks”:

NIPISSING HOMEMAKER’S CLUB

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This essay focuses on the history of Nipissing Homemaker’s Club and the Nishinaabekweg who have led and continue to lead on Nbisiing Nishinaabeg territory to contribute to the well-being of their community, caring for in Elder John Sawyer’s words, “Everything from our hearts to our hockey sticks.”¹

As many of you know, Glenna Beaucage and I (Katrina Srigley) have been gathering, listening to, and learning from the histories of Nipissing First Nation.² The history of the Nipissing Warriors hockey team (1965-1975) was the first we studied closely. We have shared this story in an exhibit, which hangs permanently at Nbisiing Secondary School, in lesson plans, and in a short documentary.³ We have moved from this work to listening to the stories of the Nishinaabekweg leaders of this territory, several of whom were known as the Nipissing Homemakers. As with the Warriors, we are listening to people’s stories, as well as gathering photographs, newspaper clippings, and historical memorabilia (e.g. pins, commemorative plaques, clothing). This work is ongoing, so please let us know if you have stories you’d like to share connected to the theme of Nishnaabekweg leadership. This

essay is just the beginning of the sharing we hope to do in community. Stay tuned, for instance, for news of a box lunch social as our work unfolds.

The principal question guiding our work is - What do Nbisiing Nishinaabekwe’s stories teach us about their leadership on this territory? As you’ll see, this journey takes us through the history of the Homemakers, but also teaches us important lessons rooted in the past and present, as well as for the future about the importance of making contributions to community and seeking guidance from Nishinaabekwe for balance and well-being in our lives.

An Organizational History – Indian Homemakers’ Clubs

The Indian Homemakers’ Clubs, as Indian and Northern Affairs called them at the outset, were initiated in the province of Saskatchewan in 1937 by inspector of Indian Agencies, Dr. Thomas Robertson. There were five original groups in the early years, growing to 8 in 1952 and a remarkable 178 across the country by 1956.⁴

The organization’s motto was “For Home and Country”.⁵ From the perspective of Indian Affairs, the purpose of the groups was to organize and enlist Indigenous women at the local level in modelling proper Canadian womanhood and citizenship. In short, to enlist them in the colonial project, ensuring that they developed “approved practices for home efficiency,” helped the less fortunate in their communities and, through their work, “stimulate[d] and train[ed] leadership...to develop better, happier more useful citizens.”⁶ It may surprise you to know, that between 1948 and 1966 the Indian Affairs branch of the federal government was housed within the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. Indigenous peoples, like immigrants, were viewed as a group that needed to be taught how to be Canadians, though I will note that historians have shown that such programs were much more tolerant of efforts to integrate and protect immigrant than Indigenous cultures.⁷

Local clubs were given \$25 (approximately \$200 in 2018) as start-up money and a sewing machine. While they were to be autonomous, information about clubs was collected and sent to the Welfare and Training

Branch and in 1950 social workers were hired to organize and facilitate the groups. This change coincides with an increase in the number of clubs, but also the 1951 amendments to the Indian Act, which allowed provincially employed social workers to apprehend First Nation's children.⁸

Nipissing First Nation's Homemaker's Club started in 1950. The first minute book we have is from 1951.

Miss Jane Bartlett was the social worker from North Bay appointed to "lead" the club, though I'd like to note that Bartlett makes an infrequent appearance in Nbisiing Nishinaabeg historical records. Between 1951 and 1985, there were four groups of Nishinaabekweg in the area - Duchesnay, Beaucage, Garden Village, and Dokis - engaged in activities associated with the

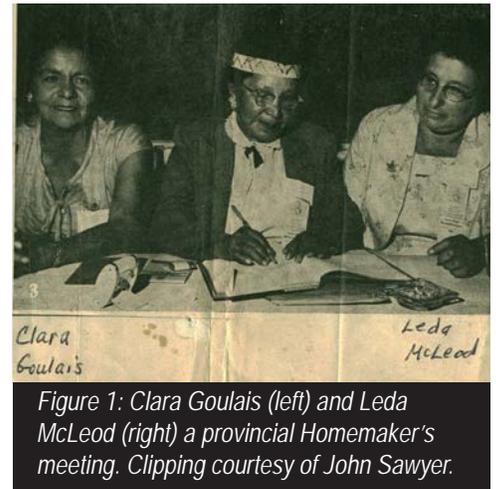


Figure 1: Clara Goulais (left) and Leda McLeod (right) a provincial Homemaker's meeting. Clipping courtesy of John Sawyer.

Homemakers. They participated in the organization locally and at the provincial level. These ladies are the focus of the stories shared here.

Contributions to Community – Identity, Belonging, and Pride

What do the stories of Nbisiing Nishnaabekweg tell us about the history of the Homemakers on this territory? How did they achieve goals for leadership, home efficiency and the betterment of their community? The short answer is the women involved in Homemakers' Clubs "viewed their womanhood and citizenship" in ways that were intimately connected to their own identities and lives as Nishinaabekweg.⁹ In important ways, Nishnaabekweg Homemakers affirmed Nishinaabe ways of knowing and being, created space to share skills and knowledge, and asserted their right to self-determination within their own contexts.¹⁰

When asked what kinds of activities the Homemakers were involved in former Chief Phil Goulais said – "What weren't they involved in really?"

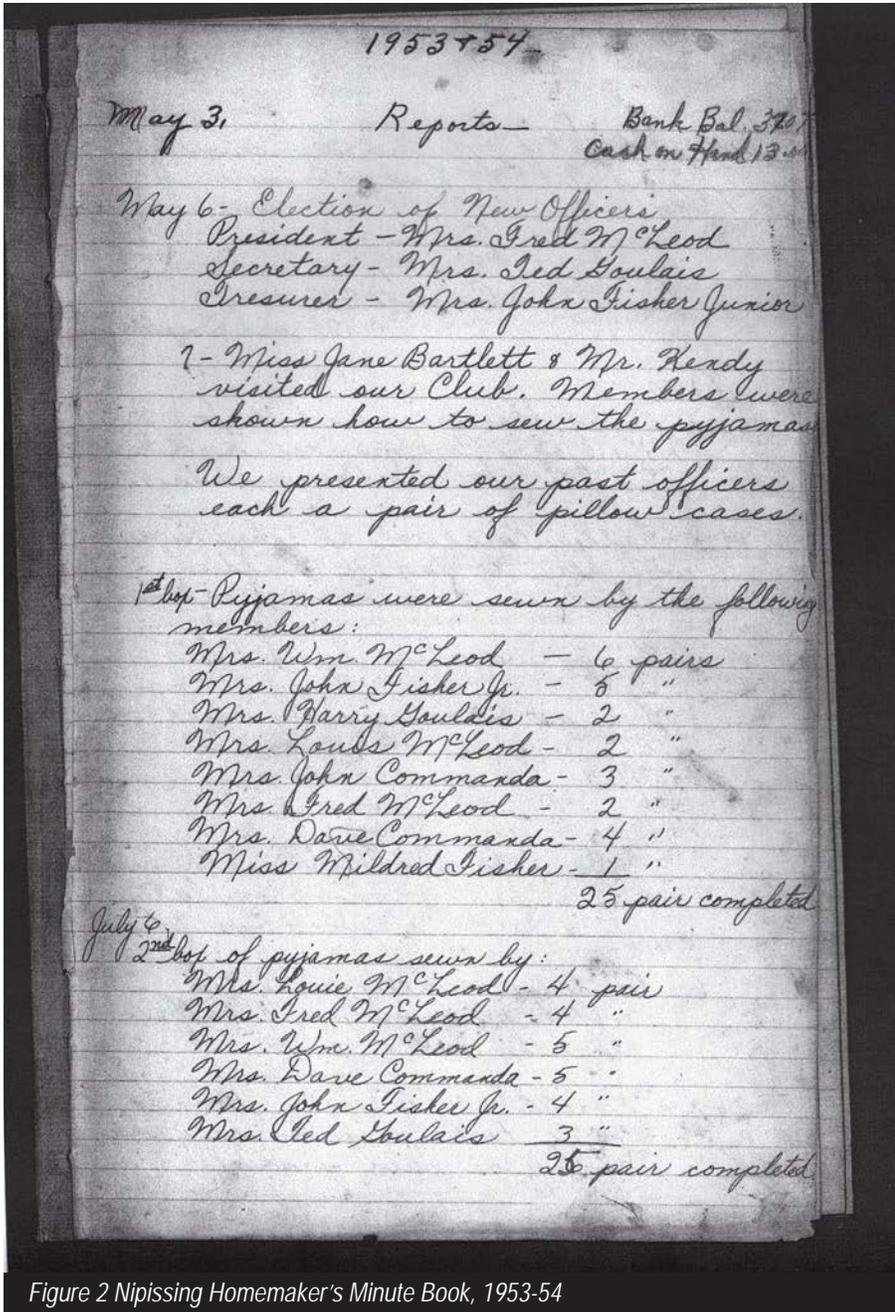


Figure 2 Nipissing Homemaker's Minute Book, 1953-54



Paul Goulais, Ed Goulais and Ed McLeod took a turn preparing the pickerel fillets and french fries at the Garden Village Fish Fry on Sunday. Although the community hall was not filled to capacity as in previous years, the cooks were kept busy most of the afternoon. Homemade beans, prepared by the Homemakers Club, completed the bill of fare for the day.

Nugget Staff Photo

Clipping courtesy of John Sawyer.

They were the band council before there was a band council."¹¹ Indeed, the Homemakers have made a remarkably wide and diverse range of contributions to their community since the early 1950s.

We start with fundraising stories. The fish fries and community picnics were perhaps the Homemakers most famous and largest events. They happened annually. Advertised in local newspapers, like the powwow today they drew community members from far and wide. Homemaker and Elder June Commanda remembers it took multiple days to prepare for these events and everyone pitched in—husbands, children, aunts, and uncles. There was shopping, potatoes to peel, cabbage to chop, fish to catch, and, finally the fries and fish to fry. "We'd buy crates of those cabbage and we'd make that coleslaw by hand (laughter)! We'd work for two, three days before." In the end, explained June, "You'd have blisters in your hands from peeling [75 pound bags] of potatoes"

and sore feet from standing all day at the concession. The lines, we have been told, went on and on all through the day.¹²

Along with the picnics, the Homemakers ran a convenience store on the beach. It was the first corner store in Garden Village, selling candies, chocolate bars, and the like.

Social events, including dances and dinners, were an important

source of funds and entertainment. The box lunch socials certainly have a fond place in the memories of many community members. For this event, the Homemakers saved shoeboxes for the year. Nishinaabekwe made lunches for two and placed them decorated shoeboxes to be auctioned off in the community. Men bid on the lunches without knowing whose box it was until it was opened. They then had lunch with the woman whose name was in the box. Homemaker Jeanette Goulais remembers that the ladies would make lunches for those unable to do so or sometimes those who were too shy. This made for some funny lunch dates, when some men who'd been given tips (mine is the blue box!) bid on the wrong box and ended up having a lunch date with the wrong person.¹³

The Homemakers also engaged in fundraising in support of the health and wellbeing of community members. As June Commanda explained, the Homemakers organized one of the first Native

Diabetes Associations in Canada in the 1980s, raising funds to support the needs of community members. The group was highly successful and only stopped when Diabetes Canada insisted that they submit all funds to the national organization, rather than turning the money directly back to the community.

The variety of ways that Nishinaabekwe contributed to community through these funds is also a remarkable part of this story. I first learned about the Homemakers through the Warriors story – hockey sticks, the first team jerseys, and payment of fines for those who got into tussles on the ice. This support extended to other youth teams. Further to this, the Seniors' Christmas Luncheon, which still happens today, was initiated by the Homemakers, providing celebration and gifts for many seniors who would otherwise



Photograph courtesy of Nipissing First Nation Heritage Collection. From left to right Leda McLeod, Susan Goulais, Jeanette Goulais, Stella McLeod, and Barbara Young

not be able to attend festive events. There were also celebrations for new babies, which included food, gifts, and full sets of handmade diapers.

The sewing machines were certainly a central part of the Homemakers' work. In the early years, the Homemakers sewed pajamas sent to them by Indian Affairs. They were paid 25 or 50 cents per set. In the spring of 1953, the minute

books tell us that Miss Jane Bartlett visited the Homemakers to show them how to sew the pajamas. The Homemakers consistently sewed pajamas over that year. In March 1954, Bartlett presented them with a cheque for 67.50 for sewing 90 pairs of pajamas. That same month the Homemakers requested and received a gift of a button hole maker from Indian Agent Gauthier. These sewing

projects provided opportunities for Homemakers to raise funds for individual families and the community.

Providing donations to families in need is another role that the Homemakers had in community. The minute books make clear that donations and loans were shared frequently. Funds were given for those needing to travel for healthcare or stay in hospital for an extended period of time. This included gifts of cigarettes. This would not happen today! The Homemakers also supported the Holy Spirit Church, which continues to have an important role in the community. The minute books tell us that in the early years, the Homemakers paid monthly for the priest's food and looked after his apartment. In 1960, they purchased a new electric organ for the church for \$695. They paid a \$200 initial deposit and then 22\$ in monthly installments. Nishinaabekwe of NFN still provide important community support for funerals, hosting luncheons for bereaved community members. Last but not least, the Homemakers helped build the first community hall and some of them were involved in establishing the Friendship Centre in North Bay, with the explicit purpose of establishing a culturally meaningful space for Indigenous youth. As is clear here, the Homemakers were involved in a remarkable number of ways, contributing funds to community.

Nishinaabekwe teachers
- sharing knowledge in
community

These contributions to community

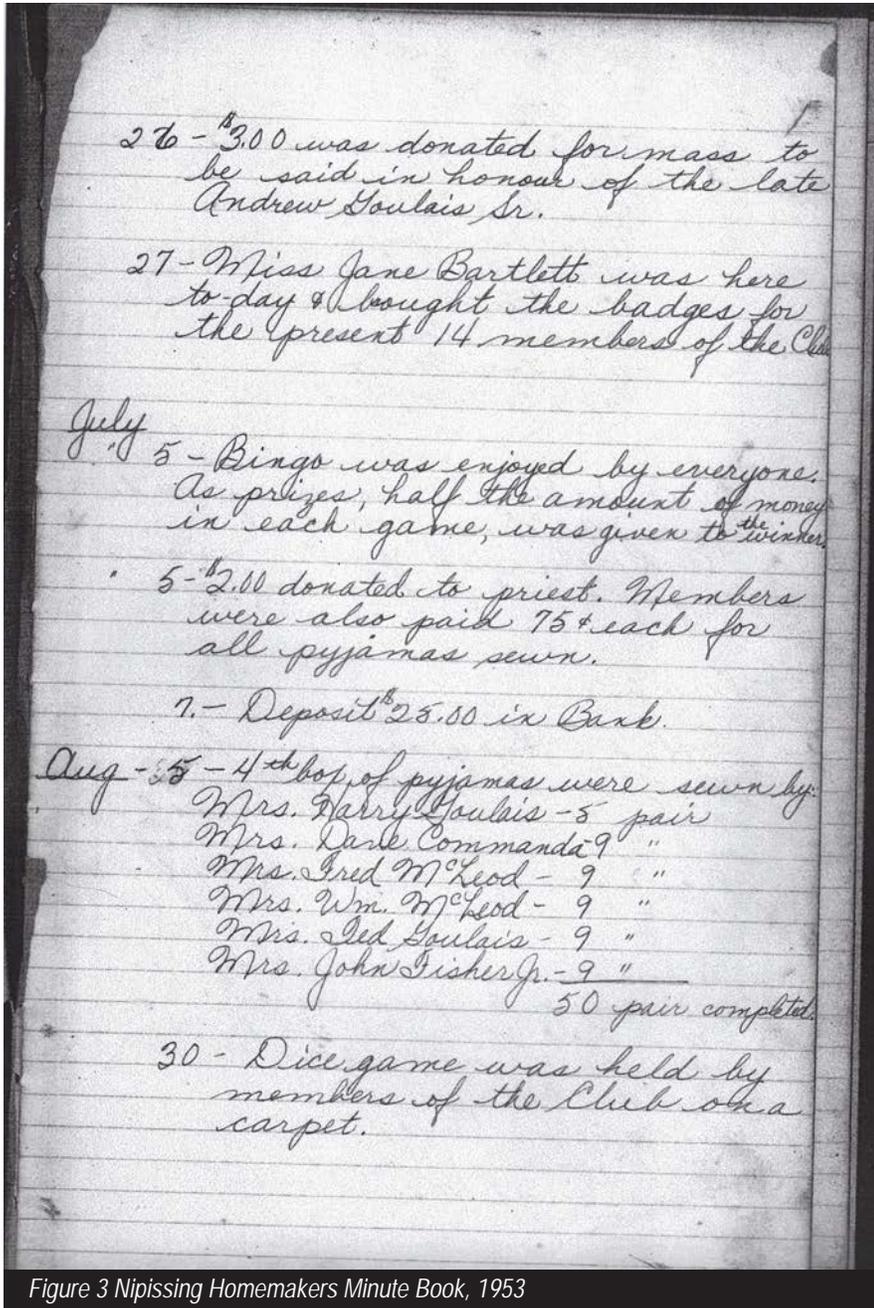


Figure 3 Nipissing Homemakers Minute Book, 1953

were not just about giving, they were also about teaching, passing on knowledge and skill to other generations about the ways Nishinaabekwe contribute to home and community, to offer a variation on the original motto for these organizations. We must understand these stories within Nishinaabeg worldview and particularly the value placed on contributions to community for belonging and for community balance and well-being.¹⁴ It is evident in these stories that the Homemakers are enacting the characteristics of Nishinaabekwe womanhood important to them and creating space to pass on those teachings to others, training leaders to give high regard to contributions to community.

In line with this teaching, we can understand the picnics as much more than a place to sell fish or hotdogs. They were a community affair where everyone was included and everyone helped. Remembering picnics at Duchesnay, one community member recalled Homemaker Ruth Couchie starting with a pot of water and then through fundraising purchasing a steamer. This effort provided lessons about hard work and respect because Couchie was not “teaching us how to cook hot dogs” in those days. She was teaching us about belonging, about working for and contributing to your community. “You see,” continued the community member, “nobody was excluded - status or non-status; Indigenous or non-Indigenous.” The Homemakers also supported the musical ambitions of young people, many of whom felt disconnected from community because they had lost status, by inviting them to play at the picnics, renting musical equipment

and, in the process, “keeping them out of trouble!” In this way, the Homemakers honored the skills of young people, making them feel important, and provided teachings about how to live in community in a good way.

The handwork skills of the Homemakers are well known. Sewing machines were put to good use to teach others. Some of this work was sold at picnics, but for Nishinaabekwe skilled sewing and leatherwork was also about cultural identity and self-determination, rather than simply the skills of a housewife touted by Indian Affairs.

Homemakers were regularly honored for their contributions to community. In August 1975, Homemaker Ruth Couchie, who was honored for International Year of the Women, explained this in the following way, “Culture is important. The Indian people should learn more about their culture. A knowledge and background of culture can only add to a feeling of true pride.”¹⁵

Nishinaabekwe Leaders

Many community members, including former chiefs, emphasize that in these years nothing went forward without the support of the Homemakers. “They showed up at the polls and voted, you know. IT mattered... If they decided you were out, you were out.” Aware of this, a community member provided direction to Phil Goulais: “Get out from behind the desk and go talk to the Elders,” to the women, the community member explained. The Homemakers discussed community



issues and made decisions. “Then,” Goulais explained “they would say – That is our chief – and they were always right.”

While providing leadership inside the community, Homemakers also led in important ways outside of the community, particularly when it came to education. The Homemakers led a successful four-year (1971-1975) campaign to get a trustee from Nipissing First Nation on the Catholic District School board. They wrote letters, built relationships across the territory, gathered information, and organized protests.

At this time, most children from Nipissing First Nation attended schools within this school board. In 1971, one of the school trustees at the request of Nishinaabekwe leadership tabled a motion to create this position. It was defeated. The trustee accused the board of language and race bigotry. This was only the beginning of the story. A letter from Muriel Commanda appeared in the *North Bay Nugget* that same year, arguing that democracy was seriously compromised by this decision:

“Occasionally it is forgotten that we live in a democratic society, in which every group should be represented to voice its opinions and ideas...Has it ever occurred to some people that we, the Indian people, also live in this country. That we, the Indian people, also must compete and survive in this ‘great white culture’. We must educate ourselves to your ideas to make any sort of headway....Let us not forget that for many years, Indian children have been attending separate schools, This was not a matter of choice for the Indian people...If we are indeed to be forced to attend school, should we not have the right to settle the important issues which arise?”¹⁶

Between 1972-1975, protest momentum picked up among Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. In 1973, the Parent Teacher Association of Our Lady of Sorrows wrote a letter to the board in support of Nipissing First Nation. In 1974, the Minister of Education investigated the matter and noted that as 107 NFN children attended Separate schools in the area, representation was mandatory under the Schools Administration Act. Indian Affairs threatened to cut off funding from the board if they did not allow for Indigenous representation. Still the board resisted, disputing the number reached by the Minister of Education saying 6 of the 107 students had been incorrectly counted. The matter went to Supreme Court of Ontario. In the meantime, by 1975 the issue had become heated enough that Reverend Jim Hutton refused to bless the new school board during its inaugural meeting, after another motion was defeated, stating

that “In his humble opinion the board needs more than a blessing it needs an exorcism.”¹⁷ That same week, 75% of Our Lady of Sorrows students walked out in a show of support for NFN. Walkouts also occurred at sister schools in North Bay. Homemaker and school committee spokesperson Leda McLeod asserted that NFN would be removing its students from the board as early as the following week. At the February 1975 meeting, McLeod organized for more than 100 people to appear for the board vote. The motion passed. Isadore Beaucage was sworn into the position on 4 March 1975. This ended a four-year struggle, which highlights Nishinaabekwe leadership. It is important to note that the Homemakers were not participating in a new form of Nishinaabe womanhood, but rather building on a long tradition of such leadership in their community and other Nishinaabe communities around the Great Lakes – traditions built on wisdom, respect, and bravery.

Coming full circle – the Homemakers’ stories today

Why do we share these stories with you? Well stories are meaningful. They are about identity and belonging and not enough Nishinaabekwe history has been shared from the perspective of Nishinaabekwe themselves. In fact, Nibisiing Nishinaabeg territory is alive with these stories. Stories that acknowledge and honor women.

Finally, and importantly, we do so to create space where the teachings

embodied in the stories of the Homemakers are shared to teach about contributions to community in all their forms. It is the loss of these teachings that many community members lament as the most difficult consequences of the last thirty years. One community member said, “When I think about all of those things [that the Homemakers did] it’s kind of emotional for me because you don’t see that anymore. How many things can those women do? You know, have a dozen kids and do all of those things? Another agreed, “It’s emotional for me too because the kids are looking for that...they know they are missing something” when there is not abundant space for their aunties and mothers and grandmothers to look after everything from their hearts to their hockey sticks.

References

- 1 John Sawyer, interview for the Warriors documentary - <http://www.nipissingu.ca/warriors>, last accessed 16 April, 2018. We say gchi-miigwech to June Commanda, Phil Goulais, Jeanette Goulais, and John Sawyer for sharing their memories with us. We hope others will come forward. Many thanks to Linda Coffey for her ongoing work with the Homemakers' Records at Library and Archives Canada
- 2 All of this work will result in a published book tentatively titled –*Gaa-Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing: A-Kii, Bemaadzjik, E-Niigannwang/ The Stories of Lake Nipissing, the Territory, and its People* - which we are editing. We are working with our language speakers and teachers in an Educators Working Group to move this knowledge into classrooms (preschool to college/university) on the territory. And, we are establishing an archival framework so we can preserve and make accessible all of the amazing stories we have been gifted through Kendaaswin – Nipissing First Nation Library. We have already had lots of requests for historical material from our students, which is exciting. We want to acknowledge and express our gratitude for the early work of Eliza Tru on the history of the Nipissing Homemakers.
- 3 We are grateful that the Warriors exhibit has a permanent home at Nbisiing Secondary School. A special thanks to teacher Ashley Porter for creating lesson plans from the Warriors story and for her continued commitment to teaching this history in her classroom.
- 4 For more on the organizational history of the Homemakers' Clubs and scholars who have made similar arguments see: Aroha Harris and Mary Jane Logan McCallum, "Assaulting the Ears of Government: The Indian Homemakers' Clubs and the Maori Women's Welfare League in their Formative Years," in Carol Williams, ed. *Indigenous Women and Work, From Labor to Activism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 246; Kathryn Magee, "For Home and Country": Education, Activism, and Agency in Alberta Native Homemakers' Clubs, 1942-1970," *Native Studies Review* 18, no. 2(2009): 27-49.
- 5 Women's Institutes had the same motto at the time, though I argue here that the Homemakers had a unique take on it. For more on WIs see: Linda Ambrose, *A Great Rural Sisterhood: Madge Robertson Watt and the ACWW* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
- 6 Ontario Native Homemakers' Club, "Southwestern Ontario Native Homemakers' Constitution," records Nipissing Homemaker's Club, Nipissing First Nation.
- 7 Heidi Bohaker and Franca Iacovetta, "Making Aboriginal Peoples 'Immigrants Too': A Comparison of Citizenship Programs for Newcomer and Indigenous Peoples in Postwar Canada, 1940s-1960s," *Canadian Historical Review* 90, 3(September 2009): 427-462.
- 8 For more on the Indian Act and amendments see: <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/>, last accessed 16 April, 2018.
- 9 Logan McCallum and Harris, 243. See also: Lianne Leddy, "Mostly Just as a Social Gathering": *Anishinaabe Kwewak* and the Indian Homemakers' Club, 1945-1960," in *Aboriginal History: A Reader* ed. Karl Hele (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2013), 125-147.
- 10 Heather Howard-Bobiwash, "Like Her Lips to My Eat": Reading Anishnaabekweg Lives and Aboriginal Cultural Continuity in the City," in *Feminist Fields: Ethnographic Insights*, eds. Rae Bridgman, Sally Cole, and Heather Howard-Bobiwash (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999), 117-136.
- 11 Phil Goulais, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, 19 October, 2017, Garden Village, ON.
- 12 June Commanda, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, 4 May 2017, Garden Village, ON.
- 13 Jeanette Goulais, interview with Glenna Beaucage and Katrina Srigley, 29 June 2017, Garden Village, ON.
- 14 On the importance of contributions to community, see: Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2016 [2000]); Leah Schneider, "Complementary Relationships: A Review of Indigenous Gender Studies," in *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration*, eds. Robert Innes and Kim Anderson (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 62-79.
- 15 The Homemakers hosted a celebration for Leda McLeod in October 1979.
- 16 Muriel Commanda, "Indians and democracy," *North Bay Nugget*, 1971.
- 17 "Indian display will be part of Sportsmen's Show," *North Bay Nugget*, Tuesday, March 11, 1975, p. 9.