

Mary Kendi

Aklavik, NT



Born: March 4, 1915

Birthplace: Pokiak Channel

Parents: Paul Koe & Elizabeth Vittrekwa

Gwich'in: Ehdiitat Gwich'in

Married: Alfred Kendi (d. 1960s)

Children: Joan, William, Richard, Elizabeth (d),
Freddy, Mabel, Forrest, Ida, Andrew
(Penny), Norman (adopted)

Mary was born at Pokiak Channel near Aklavik in March 1915 when everyone was going out to hunt muskrats. She was delivered by her grandmother (her father's oldest sister). This was before the present day town of Aklavik was established, and there were only trading posts in the area. At this time the Gwich'in did not live in the Delta on a full-time basis.

The early years of Mary's life were spent around the Pokiak Channel, in Fort McPherson and at Nagwichoo tshik, the village at the mouth of the Peel River. Fishing was good here, and there were lots of ducks and fur in the area. Her family had their main cabin here, and hunted from here into the mountains, travelling as far south as the Ogilvie Mountains.

When Mary was six years old, she was sent out on the steamboat to attend boarding school in Hay River. She was one of 22 children on the boat, and when they reached Arctic Red River, more children were picked up. Some of these children stayed in school for as long as 5 years without seeing their parents. After 3 years in Hay River her Uncle Andrew, who worked

on the steamboat as a deckhand, came to Hay River to bring her back home. Mary talks sadly about this because she felt that she was just starting to learn. However, she understands that her uncle was trying to protect her because many children were dying from the flu or measles at this time and he didn't want her to stay there and get sick. When she returned home, she learned how to live on the land. She also relearned her language.

In 1932, Mary married Alfred Kendi, who was from the Yukon, in an arranged marriage. They lived in the bush, hunting, trapping and fishing around Aklavik and raised nine children including an adopted child, seven of whom are alive today. She was widowed in the 1960s.

Throughout Mary's life, she has been an active member of the Anglican Church belonging, like her mother, to such groups as the Women's Auxiliary and Women's Institute. In 1977, she was invited with Bella Ross of Fort McPherson on a Women's Institute trip to Nairobi in Africa. She talks excitedly about this trip and all of the people she met.

Mary is one of the founding board members of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute and has been a great inspiration, teacher and source of strength to the organization. In her role as traditional knowledge and cultural instructor at the Institute's annual Gwich'in Science Camp, Mary speaks strongly about the importance of young people being well educated both in today's world and in the ways of their ancestors, their history and teachings. "I hope some day that [the children] will look at their ancestral life as a part of life that they are living now. If they have two ways of life together their life would be good. But if they do not pay attention to their history, I do not know their future."

In 1992, Mary was one of the first women in the Northwest Territories to receive the "Wise Women Award," an annual award given by the Status of Women Council of the NWT. It recognized and honoured her many years of dedication and commitment to her community – making it a better place to live and being a positive role model to everyone, especially the youth.