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WORD *Alive*

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Mary Siemens are . . .*

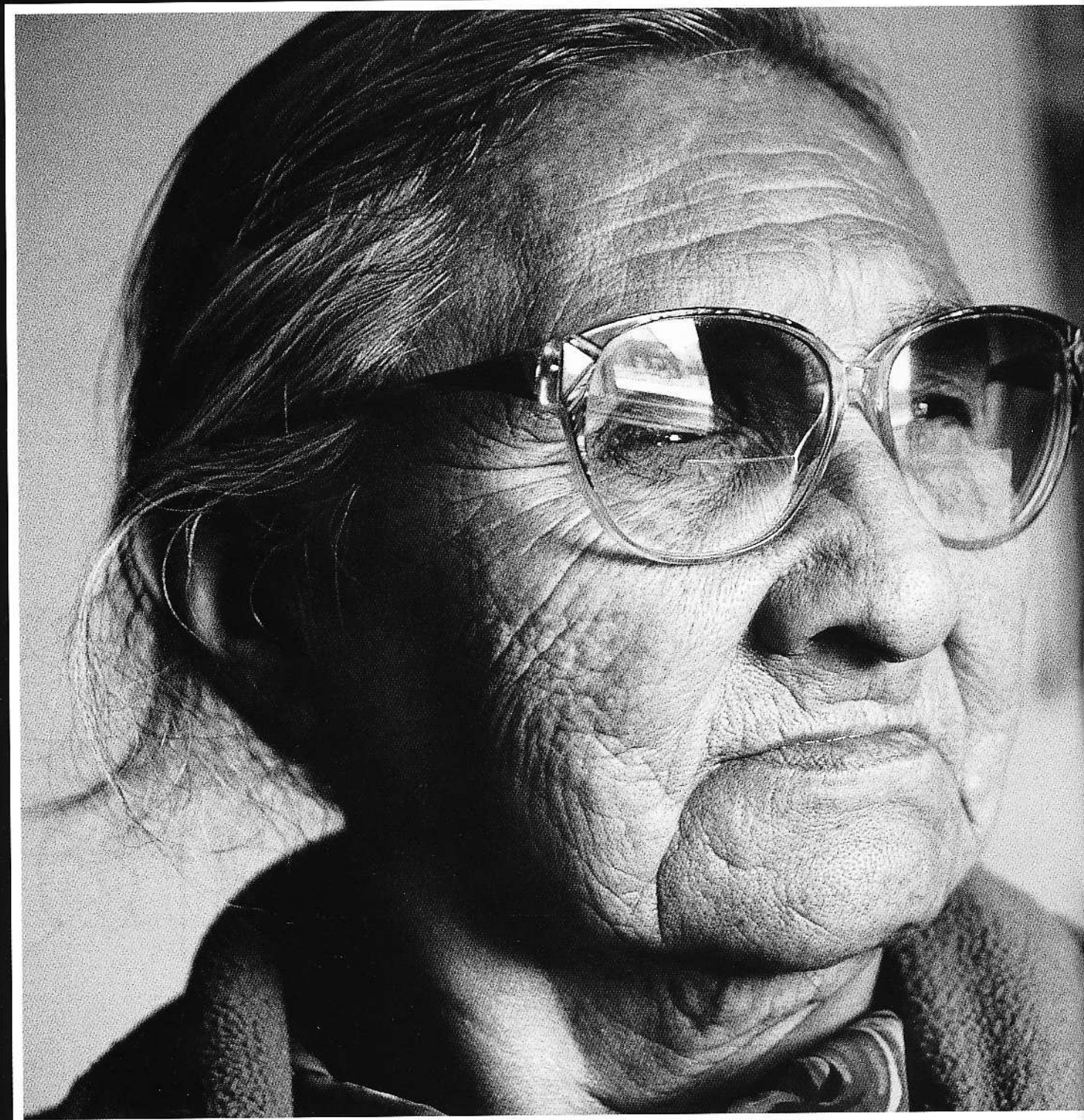
Strong Like Two People



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Straddling Dogrib and western cultures, Elizabeth Mackenzie and her daughter

Strong Like Two



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BY DWAYNE JANKE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE CROUGH

If children are taught in both cultures equally, they will be strong like two people.” Dogrib elder Elizabeth Mackenzie (left) coined the phrase in 1990 while helping to develop a mission statement for the Chief Jimmy Bruneau School in her

community of Rae-Edzo, Northwest Territories (N.W.T.).

She was building on the visionary words spoken by Chief Bruneau two decades earlier: “Our children will learn both ways; our way and the whiteman’s way.”

On many levels, Elizabeth is a perfect example of being “strong like two people.” So is her daughter Mary Siemens. They both left their Dogrib culture for a time in their youth. They both straddled two cultures. They both valued education. And they both are enthusiastic about translating the New Testament into their beloved Dogrib language.

Their story is a “like-mother-like-daughter” story, with many parallel sub-plots.

Bush Life and Mission Schools

Elizabeth was born in a tent, one of a dozen children. Four of her six brothers died before they were adults. Like other Dogrib, the family lived only occasionally at what was then called Fort Rae. Much of the time they camped out on the rugged land of the Canadian Shield north of Great Slave Lake, harvesting caribou, fish and waterfowl.

“We travelled in the bush,” says Elizabeth, now 80. “I don’t know how many months—three or four months, and then we came back for Christmas or Easter. Then we went back into the bush.”

Elizabeth’s father was a religious man who taught his children to be good people, she recalls of her upbringing. “It was hard, but we made it.

“In those days, the people didn’t understand what the Bible says,” she adds. “That’s why they were scared of God . . . [But] they kept Sunday holy always.”

In a 1996 *Up Here* magazine article (in which she was featured as “Northerner of the Year”), Elizabeth explained that as a youngster, she cried until her parents allowed her to follow her sister to the mission school at Fort Resolution, N.W.T. There she learned to read and write basic English.

Five years later, the teenager returned to her family a different person. She didn’t recognize her mother and had few of the bush or Dogrib language skills possessed by her peers. When her mother died two years later, Elizabeth turned to her oldest sister to learn the skills required of a young woman living on the land.



Elizabeth Mackenzie and Mary Siemens call Rae-Edzo home. Frozen Marion Lake, an extension of the north arm of Great Slave Lake, is a rugged backdrop to the community of 1,600. Rae-Edzo is the largest of six Dogrib settlements in the Northwest Territories. Several villages are accessible only by airplane or winter ice roads.



'Keep Reading'

Elizabeth's "strong-like-two-people" philosophy got a major boost shortly after returning home. In 1933, she travelled with her family to a gathering of people listening to the traditional prophet, Louis Ayah. Discovering she went to school, Ayah urged her to keep reading.

Elizabeth remembers him saying, "Later you can know everything like other people who can read well. Don't forget to read."

However, Elizabeth had little access to reading material, other than one small book. Determined to follow Ayah's advice, she read scraps of paper, including food tin labels and pieces of newspaper.

"Sometimes people found papers and they gave me them. Sometimes I found papers in the bush. Everything I kept and read."

It was then that Elizabeth realized bush skills and education could and should coexist.

"The two go together," she told *Up Here* magazine. "With both, it is like having some kind of power."

When Elizabeth and her husband Louis had school-aged children, the family moved to Rae permanently. They still maintained a connection to the land, however, living and working in seasonal bush camps, where they hunted and prepared meat and hides most of their lives.

All the while, Elizabeth served as a devoted mother, educational leader and quiet champion of aboriginal self-sufficiency. Over the years, she has been elected for many terms to the Rae-Edzo school board and helped develop school curriculum with a Dogrib perspective. The Elizabeth Mackenzie Elementary School in Rae is named after her.

No doubt encouraged by their mother, three of Elizabeth's daughters have worked in the field of aboriginal languages—including Mary. That is surprising considering her life's story.

Away and Back Again

"My upbringing has been two-fold—interrupted," says Mary, now married and a mother of two grown children. "I was raised as a Dogrib until I was three years old. Mom says I was speaking Dogrib already. And then I had TB."

Though many northern people had tuberculosis, the diagnosis of the disease in Mary's spine was especially worrisome to her parents. Two of her older sisters had already died of whooping cough. The thought of losing another daughter prompted the Mackenzies to take the sacrificial but necessary step of sending her to Edmonton for treatment. In 1950, their child, unable to walk, left the Dogrib community on a plane bound for Edmonton, to be put in the care of strangers of a different culture and language.



Courtesy of Mary Siemens

Thinking back to her childhood, Mary Siemens (above) describes her Dogrib upbringing as "interrupted." As a youngster, Mary was sent to Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton (left) for four years of tuberculosis treatments. Healed, Mary returned to her family. But after four years of learning English, she had forgotten her infant Dogrib and had to re-learn her mother tongue.

Mary remained in the city's Charles Camsell Hospital for four years. She survived extensive surgery of the spine and spent prolonged times of inactivity in a body cast, but remembers little of that experience. She endured much suffering, but adapted to the routines and methods of hospital life—and learned English.

When the nine-year-old returned to the North in 1955, her infant Dogrib language was all but forgotten. Mary had to adjust to a larger family and quickly re-learn Dogrib, the language spoken at home and at play. She became fluent in her native language and then later improved her English through residential and high school studies.

Really Good News

While in Yellowknife, where Mary worked as a young adult, local missionary friends encouraged her to attend a meeting led by Canadian evangelist Max Solbrekken. She went.

"When he explained that Jesus died personally for each sinner and that our sins could be forgiven . . . I thought 'this

is wonderful,'" she recalls. "It was really good news to me. It seems that I was searching for God all my life and I never found him.

"That meant a lot to me as a Dogrib person—to finally know what God wants us to do and how we can have access to Him. He's no longer a whiteman's God whom the missionaries pray to or the priest prays to."

After marrying her husband David, they went to Fort Smith, N.W.T., where Mary received teacher training. They returned to Rae-Edzo in 1983, where she worked as a primary teacher, teaching Dogrib children both English and Dogrib. Like her mother, Mary is a strong advocate of the mother tongue among her people.

"It's the language that God gave them," she says. "They should retain it not just for itself but to express who they are . . . [and] that connection to where they live and where they are from."

Mary's ability and conviction equipped her well to become a main mother-tongue translator on the Dogrib New Testament project (see "Past Visions, Current Dreams," page 10). Church readings of Scripture in Latin, English and some Dogrib over the years have left many of her people with little understanding of the whole Bible story, she says. She was thrilled to join the translation project.

"I think this is so important because the good news of God's salvation, the abundant life, forgiveness of sin, freedom from fear—all of that is finally coming to the Dogrib people."

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Elizabeth, now widowed, her eyes failing due to diabetes, says she is happy that Mary is working on Bible translation. Like mother, like daughter. Over the years, Elizabeth has helped translate Scripture into Dogrib for readings in church. She also has been a major mother-tongue resource when her daughter is stumped by a translation challenge.

Elizabeth says the Bible, which she can still only read in English, is difficult to understand at times, but it has obviously become dearer to her.

"I've found out that God is so full of love. Just love—full, full of great love."

"I know that God loves us," Elizabeth says, shifting concern to her own people. "They should know Him and why He gave us His only Son. He came to this world to save the world. It is very important nowadays to know the Bible because a lot of things are changing."

Elizabeth wants to explain how she feels when she hears God's Word in her language, but it is too difficult in English. Elizabeth speaks in Dogrib and her daughter interprets:

"You realize how great God is when you read or understand God's Word in our language. You realize how big His thoughts are about other people and the world. If we understand God's Word in our language, the world becomes small.

"It's like holding the world. Everything seems to come together." ♦



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