

Elsie Bear née Hourie, MMF Senator. (1921-2002)

Elsie Bear was born on December 13th, 1921 in Grand Marais, Manitoba, the daughter of Peter and Mary Hourie. Peter was a fisherman and Mary was a midwife as was her mother before her. Elsie had six brothers and three sisters.

From the age of eighteen Elsie worked in fishing camps cooking, which not many girls did back then. While working in the camps she met a young man, Sam Bear from Selkirk. Elsie and Sam later married and had four boys, Doug, Gary, Marlo and Gerald. When the boys reached school age, Sam and Elsie moved to Selkirk, Manitoba. Elsie worked in town cleaning offices for twenty years while raising her family, and also volunteered for the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre and the Manitoba Metis Federation. Elsie and Sam really loved children and together they helped raise over forty children. The most children they had in their house at one time was nine. Elsie stated that “they were a lot of help too!” Sam also enjoyed looking after the children while she was at work. Christmas was a special time of sharing for Elsie and her family. The day would start early when the children woke to see what was left under the tree by Santa. It then became busier when family started to arrive for a pancake and sausage breakfast. Family tradition was that the little ones made the pancakes. As soon as breakfast was over, preparations for Christmas dinner started with everyone pitching in. Elsie and Sam opened their home to feed needy families in the community. Elsie said, “I never really counted the number of people we shared our Christmas with but I guessed it was around 100 people.” She also added with pride, “There was never a shortage of food on Christmas, no matter how many people we had.”

In 1972, Elsie and Sam moved the Christmas dinner from their home to the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre in Selkirk to serve over 300 Christmas dinners. People came together on this special day with donations of food and help. Sam passed away in 1989, and Elsie continued her work in the community and with her family. She says, “It’s especially important for women to be involved in everything, to show their interests and to have a voice for themselves and their children.”



Following her extensive involvement with the Selkirk Friendship Centre, the Manitoba Metis Federation and the St. Peter's Anglican Church, her list of affiliations grew. Upon her retirement, she quickly became involved with the Manitoba Association of Friendship Centres (MAC), the Indigenous Women's Alliance, the Selkirk & District Arts Council, the Selkirk Branch of the NDP and a Senator of the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) and the Manitoba Metis Federation (MMF). However, it was her work with the Selkirk Friendship Centre where Elsie's contributions were most noticeable.

Senator Elsie Bear was involved with the Selkirk Friendship Centre for nearly 25 years and initiated some of the Centre's most important events. As noted above, for many years, she coordinated the Annual Christmas Dinner for the Needy – an event she originated. Over 250 people avoided going hungry during that special time of the year thanks to the Yuletide Meal. She always worried that some people wouldn't get a good dinner on Christmas Day and this was her way of ensuring that they never did. To honour this work, the Manitoba Metis Federation home office at 150 Henry Ave. in Winnipeg has named its cafeteria "Elsie Bears Kitchen".

Elsie received many honours in her life but the ones she was most proud of were received in 1987. She was designated as Woman of the Year, was also selected to be on the Wall of Honour at the Winnipeg Indian and Metis Friendship Centre and was made Senator of the Manitoba Metis Federation. The most prestigious honour she received was in 1992, when she was given "The Order of The Buffalo Hunt," Manitoba's highest honour given for community service.

Elsie was very proud of the fact that she is Metis. She says, "You have to be proud of what you are." Elsie Bear died on March 5, 2002 after a lengthy illness; she was 80 years of age. She will be remembered as one of the original pioneers of the Friendship Centre Movement.



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