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Peltier's Adoptive Mother Passes

By Frank & Anne Dreaver, Leonard Peltier Defense Committee Canada
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In Memory of **Ethel Pearson**, Elder of the Musgamakw Tsawataineuk Nation of the Northern Lands of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, adoptive Mother of Leonard Peltier, quietly passed on into the spirit world on Nov. 7, 1999. She was born Dec. 21, 1914.

Grandmother Ethel Pearson (or Puglid in Kwagiulth) of Comox, British Columbia died peacefully in her sleep in the early hours of Sunday morning, November 7th. She was 85 years old. Ethel was one of the few remaining and long-standing hereditary elders of the Musgamakw Tsawataineuk nation comprising the four tribes of the Kwagiulth whose traditional territory includes part of the northern lands of Vancouver Island.

As an honored leader born into her nation's clan of nobility, she was revered in the hearts of her own peoples and gained the respect and admiration of peoples nationwide. She was down-to-earth and a fighter, fearless when it came to speaking her mind. Most of all, she was a visionary and a true custodian and champion of the traditions, customs and spiritual beliefs of the Kwagiulth peoples and nation. She lived her life to defend and preserve the traditional ways.

For Leonard Peltier, Ethel will always have special meaning and her contributions in her quest for justice and his freedom are recorded in the history of our times. In 1976, when Leonard was arrested in Canada; locked up and brutally treated inside Vancouver's infamous, and now former Oakalla Prison, Ethel followed traditional protocol and lobbied all 52 chiefs of her nation who agreed to her request to formally adopt Leonard as a member of the Kwagiulth nation. The purpose was to try and stop his false extradition to the United States and, in so doing, an indigenous nation had stood up to exercise its traditional governing process.

After visiting Leonard at Oakalla, Ethel made a decision then to adopt him as her son, as a member of her family and her nation. She once recalled that she decided even before she entered the prison that she would know whether to adopt him after looking him directly into his eyes to know the truthfulness of his character. Together with her daughter, the late Donna Tyndall, a courageous fighter who had brought Leonard's plight to her mother's attention, they were a formidable force speaking out for justice. A ceremonial potlatch in accordance with the traditions and customs of her nation was later held to confirm the adoption.

From the very beginning and over the duration of almost 24 years, Ethel honored her role as Leonard's adoptive mother right up until her final departure. She bestowed to him his Kwagiulth name: Gwarth-ee-lass, meaning, "He leads-the-peoples."

As a founding member of our elders' advisory council of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee Canada, we are deeply honored to have known and worked with Ethel over the years. We have valued her advice, her encouragement and unfailing support. Losing Ethel is a great loss. She is forever irreplaceable in her commitment for her son's freedom and in later years often expressed the profound sorrow she held in her heart over his long, unjust and false imprisonment. She even prepared a videotape of herself appealing for her son's freedom. It was always her hope to see Leonard freed before she died.

We spoke with her in late September. She had just received a copy of Leonard's new book, *Prison Writings*. Fred Pearson, her husband of some 40 years, recalled she read Leonard's words and was rereading the book up until she died. She was frailer in later years and didn't travel as much with a sore leg and was recently diagnosed with the onset of osteoporosis. Granddaughter Kirby said, Ethel wished she could attend the vigil in Washington D.C. and continue to "fight for Leonard." It bothered her that she never received any letters back to all the letters she wrote to President Clinton and wife, Hilary.

That's how it was with Ethel. Over the years and it seems not so long ago, we would call her and find out she was travelling to different functions or had just come back from somewhere. She was constantly on the go. She took in all the major potlatches, husband Fred recalled. She tended to the misfortunes of her own peoples, countless wakes and burials, often-tragic deaths of suicide and violence all too familiar in Indian communities. She would speak at youth and elders' conferences, workshops and at countless social events, always with an appeal for awareness and support for Leonard.

During the early 1990s, Ethel was a respected member of the council of elders of the Assembly of First Nations and her private lobby on behalf of justice for her son, Leonard, would reach the ears of many of the national chiefs. In this capacity, she participated in many of the larger national conventions. Her son, Bill Wilson, is presently a top regional AFN representative of British Columbia. She was often saddened and frustrated that more couldn't be done, whether it was for Leonard or for so many issues of importance to Indian peoples.

She once expressed to us her frustration that she sometimes felt the role of elder at these functions was made into "window dressing." She said, they never let the elders talk, recalled Kirby, who with four-year-old son Jackson were blessed to share their lives together with Ethel. Her honesty struck at the core of human integrity and responsibility with a relentless passion, counseling her own peoples to set examples and stop fighting with one another. She couldn't help but speak her mind. For Ethel there was no other way.

We remember Ethel when we marched in Ottawa in 1989 to the Canadian Parliament and to the Supreme Court of Canada, carrying the staff and setting the pace wearing the striking floor-length traditional cape of her nation. Even then in her 70s she would never complain or dream of giving up before any of the others. When asked and if she could, she would speak without hesitation at rallies, vigils, and conferences on behalf of her son.

One highlight was the tremendous solidarity expressed by several thousand delegates at the Canadian Labour Congress convention in Vancouver in 1992, who gave a standing ovation after Ethel delivered a speech for truth and justice. She was to do the same at a B.C. Federation of Labour convention, where she brought them to their feet, said Fred. And yet, she always wished she could do more. Ethel had hoped to dedicate a ceremonial feast to Leonard and to her people before she died to help instill pride and dignity in her people. She believed that foreign, dominant religions and the experience of residential schooling had robbed them of this, said Kirby.

We all will sorely miss Ethel. She was born in Kingcome Inlet, on the B.C. coast north of Vancouver into a family of seven brothers and sisters. Her son, Calvin, and daughters Shadow and Donna predecease her. Son Bill Wilson, daughter Caroline Cramner, numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren survive her. She is being laid to rest on Nov. 13th in Courtney on Vancouver Island with a traditional native ceremony and feast to follow at the Long House on Campbell River Reserve.

Frank & Anne Dreaver, LPDC Canada
(416) 439-1893, lpdccanada@gmail.com
