

Academic, journalist still blazing trails at 82

Olive Dickason's ground-breaking life profiled



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Eleven years ago, Ottawa historian Olive Dickason made headlines across the country when she took her fight against mandatory retirement to the Supreme Court.

It was the culmination of a seven-year battle begun when the 65-year-old Dickason had been told she had to step down from her post as a ground-breaking professor of Canadian history at the University of Alberta because of the school's retirement policy.

She won a Human Rights Commission appeal against the university and continued to teach as the case worked its way

through the courts, eventually to be lost on the vote of a 72-year-old Supreme Court justice.

There is nary a mention of this legal battle or its final irony in *Olive Dickason's First Nations*, an hour-long profile of Dickason that debuts on Vision TV tonight at 10. But Dickason's life has been so full, there's lots left over to fill up the time.

The profile is principally a celebration of Dickason's defining work in the study of aboriginal history in Canada, a field that hadn't even existed before the 1970s, when she forced crusty academics at the University of Ottawa to reconsider their notion that Canada's natives had been a prehistoric people.

Now she is known for several seminal works on native history, including her doctoral thesis, *The Myth of the Savage*. Five years ago, Dickason was honoured with a lifetime achievement award at the Annual Aboriginal Achievement Awards.

The same spunk that marked her assault on the ivory towers of Canadian history and her refusal to be put out to pasture also helped her rise from an adolescence spent in the Saskatchewan backwoods to become a pioneering female journalist in the halcyon days of



Tonight's profile of Olive Dickason, seen at left in a recent photo and, right, in her youth, tells the story of 'this person from the woods, who didn't dress very well but who could discuss Plato and Aristotle.'

Canadian newspapers.

She was a single mother, and a reporter and editor working for such papers as the *Regina Leader Post*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Globe and Mail*, when she first developed an interest in aboriginal affairs. It came during an introduction to some of her mother's relatives in Saskatchewan, Dickason said recently.

"I just took one look at them and realized there was some family history that hadn't been discussed," she said. It turned

out that Dickason's blue-eyed, fair-skinned mother, a onetime elementary school teacher, had descended from Métis stock.

Dickason's mother was a mainstay when the family was forced to leave Winnipeg and live off the land in Saskatchewan.

She pushed her daughters in their studies, at least as far as the family could afford to support them: Grade 10. Dickason's education continued in an informal way with the help of a homesteading Scotsman with an extensive classical library he



ason in his college, and arranged for her to take a BA at Wilcox after wangling an affiliation with the University of Ottawa. It was to Ottawa that Dickason turned at the age of 50 when she decided to start a new career, taking post-graduate courses in the humanities while working full time in public relations for the National Art Gallery.

For her doctorate, Dickason wanted to study natives in Canada at the time of their first contact with Europeans. "The graduate studies committee harrumphed and said, 'You can't do that. The Indians have no history,'" she recalls.

The academics, native elders and historians who appear in *Olive Dickason's First Nations* say the grey-haired doctoral candidate proved the committee wrong, using European records, archeology and anthropology to piece together a convincing history.

A stroke a couple of years ago interrupted Dickason's work on her latest book, a comparative study of first contact between Europeans and natives in North America and the Caribbean. But she plans to take up her research again this summer, still forging new paths at the age of 82.

loved to lend to her.

A few years later, while traveling around the province selling magazine subscriptions, Dickason met the colourful Catholic priest, Father Athol Murray, founder of the then rough-and-tumble Notre Dame College in Wilcox, Sask.

"He was absolutely fascinated by this person from the woods, who didn't dress very well, by the way — I still hadn't acquired the polish of a southerner — but who could discuss Plato and Aristotle."

Murray made room for Dick-