

## Ep 2: LAY OF THE LAND

**See also Bill Louttit's story:**

<https://mcccanada.ca/stories/why-living-land-crucial-nearly-impossible-do>

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**Colleen:** This is just a short visit, but if you guys want to come back again maybe third week of October before the snow really comes in, I can do that again. Take my time. Yeah, because for teachings to happen, it's four seasons in a year. Can I just take a quick picture of you guys too? What's your name?

**VO:** You're listening to Undercurrents. My name is Ken Ogasawara and I'm part of the Community Engagement team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. Undercurrents is one way to tell the rich stories coming from our community of partners, program participants, staff, and others. Undercurrents is brought to you by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Kindred is committed to learning, building partnerships, and mobilizing their resources to make tangible progress towards reconciliation. This episode is about the Lay of the Land.

**Colleen:** Because first of all, I'm not that good with English. I have enough English just to get by type of thing. I'm not going to try to be all professional and fancy and stuff like that.

**VO:** This is Colleen Hookimaw and she has something much more powerful and rare than fancy English. She is fluent in her native tongue: Omushkego Cree.

**Colleen:** Because my story is about... for me to tell you guys my story, it would take up to a year. So this is just a point form, main idea.

**VO:** Colleen is instantly likeable - friendly, talkative and welcoming. And as we'll soon hear, her language is just the beginning of her deepening connection to traditional knowledge and skills.

**Colleen:** I came from Northern Ontario, Hawley Lake. It's way past Peawanuck area. It's called Sutton Lake, the Chokomolins and Hunters and other families from the past that lived there. Four generations - I'm fourth generation. So we have land back home.

**VO:** I'm visiting Colleen with Lyndsay Mollins Koene and Clara Wheaton from MCC's Indigenous Neighbours program and we're just outside of Cochrane, Ontario, about 100 km north of Timmins where MCC's Northern Office is, and 800km due north from my home in Kitchener. We're winding our way down dirty country roads passing farm fields and forests.

Colleen: This is my aunt's and uncle's farm. It's not mine, it's theirs. And I'm just leasing over here, the land.

## Growing Food

Colleen: And now the other side, keep on going that way. Can't see it from here. We have about 5,000 pounds of potatoes growing right now.

Lyndsay: 5,000.

Colleen: Yes.

Lyndsay: Wow. And is some of that from the gardening seed, that Mennonite Central Committee gave you ?

Colleen: Yes, yeah. I made markings, your potatoes are on this side at the edge. Yeah. And last time our potatoes are this big.

VO: Lyndsay and Colleen are referring to a Community Gardening Bundle that Colleen received from MCC. Each of these bundles contains everything you need to start a large garden including 4 shovels, 4 hand cultivators, 30 pairs of gardening gloves, and climate and soil-appropriate vegetable seeds including 500 pounds of potato seeds, which Colleen has clearly seen success with. This is part of an MCC project called Sowing Reconciliation which is in its sixth season. Across Treaty 9 MCC has supported 12 First Nations and six Indigenous urban organizations as well as individuals like Colleen with Community Gardening Bundles. These bundles have been sent at the request of these communities, their goal is to grow gardeners, and to help folks get excited about kickstarting their own community gardens.

VO: Colleen is passionate about growing and harvesting food and over the course of this episode, Colleen will lead us on a tour of both the physical lay of the land she works on and some of the issues related to the landscape of Indigenous food sovereignty. But what is food sovereignty anyway? For the purposes of this episode, we can think of it as communities choosing how to manage and interact with their food systems on their own terms. This includes all the land, water, plants and animals involved.

Colleen: Tell my uncle and auntie thank you, they helped us a lot. And we help them. We work together actually, that's what works. So there's more land that way, heading that way. Do you see?

Colleen: Yeah.

Colleen: For me to go there, but not taking chance. I've been stuck already twice going that way. No, been stuck everywhere actually.

VO: Colleen rents 5 acres from her aunt and uncle. Along with some friends and her aunt and uncle, Colleen has started with planting potatoes with plans to expand the crop variety as they learn more. As we drive through the property, I can see a number of buildings - the main farmhouse, a barn, a number of sheds, and all of this surrounded by bush. It's peaceful, maybe even lonely in the fall after the hustle of harvest time. But we drive past all of these as we reach our final destination

## Teepee

Colleen: And here's the tipi, my family made it. My oldest son too, my boys got to see when we made this. My uncle helped out. That was made by... he cut his own wood here. We got the wood from here, hardly from the store.

Colleen: We try to preserve the trees as much as we can.-Trees are our friends. Treat the trees like your ancestors. So we don't hurt the trees, we try not to disturb the land as much as we can.

VO: The teepee is about 16 feet high, with half a dozen long poles cut from the surrounding bush. It's covered with a white tarp and the interior is about 10 feet across. Colleen holds back the flap to welcome us inside.

Colleen: So it's kind of messy in here. This here needs a bit of a cleanup because people stayed here and we got so busy. But then again, we try our best. But I need to be this fixed up for next time. Given that I was on a tight budget, right? Tight budget, I went-

Lyndsay: This is beautiful.

Colleen: Oh, thank you.

Lyndsay: No, I could just smell the fire. Like as I sit here, pretend.

## Smoking

Colleen: For example, we did 30 geese here. They're all hanging like this. 30 geese, smoked. That's what these are used for.

VO: In the centre of the teepee is a fire pit. Set over this fire pit is a wooden rack set parallel to the ground with 4 foot long blackend sticks about as thick as a hockey stick, laying across the rack. These are the sticks over which the meat is draped as the slow-burning fire below produces this life-giving smoke.

Colleen: So they're lined up like this. Even we can use these for the fish too, but unfortunately I didn't have that much help this summer. I wanted to go fishing again. Well, my cousin did show me again, but we didn't have enough help.

**Colleen:** So we take the wood, go like this, line them all up. Whoops, watch your face. We did bang our heads a few times in here. So we lined them all up. They're dark, they're dirty, but they're all right. So for example, we go like this. Then once we cut up the geese... which my cousin was showing me... cut up the geese, we hang them up like a flap. Then the firewood, it's not the regular wood. It's not the chop up tree, not like that. We use these kind of firewood, the old dead trees. See how light that is?

**Lyndsay:** Looks sort of like driftwood, right?

**Colleen:** Yeah, it looks heavy, but it's not. See? So that's the kind of firewood we use for smoking foods. It's not regular wood. You're smoking the food at a slow pace. It's not like, oh, big bonfire. Just we lay it flat like this, the firewood. So it's just smokey, like slowly the flavor.

**VO:** How long does it take to smoke a rack of geese?

**Colleen:** It all depends, some people do it all day. Some people four hours, some people do it two days, depending on the temperatures too.

**VO:** All this talk of smoking wild meat leads to the question of why? Why do all this work of hunting and preparing and smoking what is called "country food", when food can be bought at the grocery store?

### **Store-bought food vs wild food**

**Colleen:** Okay, the food. There's a big difference at the store. I still buy it anyways because how do I know if it's has steroids? How do I know that? How do I know if the cow meat or any kind of meat? Even the... I don't know about the fish, but how do I know if it's been injected with stuff to make them more bigger and fatty and juicier? I don't know that, we don't know that. So I'd rather prefer the moose and the fish if I can get it.

**VO:** Colleen is not alone in preferring country food to store-bought meat. We'll take a brief detour to hear from Bill Louttit, an Indigenous elder I recently interviewed for a separate written story for MCC. Bill snared his first rabbit when he was 5 years old and over the next 75 years Bill fed his family and community with meat harvested off the land. Here's Bill describing his upbringing in Lake River about 150 km north of Attiwapiskat.

**Bill:** Anyway, Lake River was a place where we spent the winter and the springs and the fall when we were there. I never known of a time where food would be scarce. There were rabbits, ptarmigans, sharp tail grouse, spruce grouse, caribou, moose. Everything you needed to eat was outside the door.

**VO:** Bill also talked about how in his later years his doctor advised him to cut back on greasy food to remedy some health problems. But Bill found that not all grease is created equal.

**Bill:** The funny part about that is the spring goose, Canada goose and the snow geese, they migrate from the south where they were living off of wheat fields, corn fields, are what I view to fatten up.

**Bill:** Then you come north again in the spring. And they're like a quarter inch of fat under the skin. When I eat the geese, there seem to be a difference. I don't have any problems, no matter how much I eat. But if I call Kentucky Fried Chicken to send over a dinner for two or three, it's almost like you get sick right away. So I don't know what's a difference in the rich richness of the grease I eat from Kentucky Fried Chicken and the difference I get just as rich and fat that the geese. The geese don't bother me at all, but I have to be really careful if I'm not going to live off the land, I've got to be careful of what I eat when I go shopping, what I buy.

## Hunting

**Colleen:** So I like to say thank you to the hunters. Yeah, to the men and some women too. So I am trying to hunt myself too, because there comes a point in time when they're all busy, they can't be available. So you got to be your own person to get your own food type of thing.

**VO:** Another reason for more self-sustaining food security is the infamously high cost of groceries in the North. Simply put, the further North you go, the more expensive fresh produce and meat becomes. If you think your grocery bill has ballooned over the last year, take that number and triple it for remote Northern First Nations communities. If you can't pay \$22 for a 4-pack of sweet peppers, the cheaper alternatives are highly processed foods packed with sugar and salt, or sugary drinks. This has led to predictable health issues across many First Nations who cannot afford healthy food through the conventional food system or have lost the knowledge or land access to harvest food in traditional ways.

**Colleen:** So we could come here again sometime October, third week. After I go, we go moose hunting. I'm going moose hunting with my son, so he's going to shoot the moose. And my friend's taking me and my other cousin's coming. Yeah.

**Colleen:** So it's really important to get all the fresh food. And we don't have no city, obviously. We're not going to get no moose that's been living in Timmins for like two years. We go on the outskirts, far, far away. And if you ask me, or I don't know.

**Lyndsay:** Nice.

**Colleen:** Yeah, my cousin knows how to hunt here. But me, somewhere I got - left the reservation life, the bush life. That's what happened. So I'm trying to get it back today. Not to say I know everything too either, again.

**VO:** This is a common theme among many Indigenous peoples - having left the bush life, as Colleen calls it. Many have migrated to urban centres for economic and educational

opportunities. Others have been separated from their traditional knowledge by more explicit government policies. This is Bill Louttit again

**Bill:** If you're in your formative years, you needed to have a person that you look up to. That was kind of interrupted by, not only in my case, but a lot of other people my age at the time, is residential school. That interrupted the skills that you needed in order for you to survive out on a land.

**VO:** Since the beginning of Canada as a colonial entity, the government has used its power and policies to eliminate the traditional teachings and cultures of Indigenous nations across this land. Residential schools was one notorious way to accomplish this. Another was the reserve system which essentially restricted many nomadic communities to bounded parcels of land, severely hampering access to land and thus eroding any chance of food sovereignty..

Colonial systems are not just a thing of the past, either. They continue to impact Indigenous people every day. Indigenous writer Sarah Augustine, said, and I quote "Systems are created by someone, for someone. They most often serve the interests of the group that formed them."

Colleen has lived this reality for years in trying to get government funding for her food and community growing projects.

**Colleen:** See. I've been trying those guys for years now. I've been trying like 10 years. They don't want to listen. It's like, what's going on? This is the real stuff. Oh, it's all about money, money, money. The government doesn't really pay attention to people like me. I've been an advocate for about... how many years now, 19 years, 20. So I started from the bottom just by myself with ideas and visions, but I couldn't seem to pull through because society is too much a big gap in there. Something's wrong. Favoritism, money. We're all separated now. So the government doesn't seem to want to really help, so it's people like you guys, like me, that come together and make it happen.

And meanwhile, we're the ones that are scrambling just to do and get by. Whether it's from financially, from food, what we have. That's the way the government sets it up. He has a circle for us to keep on coming back and rely on him. Does that make sense? Chasing him around.

But not me. I decide to do my own thing and not wait for him and take my own leadership. And not everybody was happy about that, I'll tell you that. Not everybody. I met some people along the way. I became reluctant after of who to trust because of what I'd gone through. I met all the people that tried to stop me, but I'm like, no, can't do this. This is me, and I got to do this.

**VO:** Colleen's self-determination is not only admirable, in many ways it's necessary. For as many times as Indigenous ideas have been ignored, well-meaning settlers have tried to impose their ways onto Indigenous peoples. We settlers who think we know better and don't value the lived experience of those they are trying to help. Colleen has definitely come across these folks.

**Colleen:** I met people that say they know culture, but they don't know that I'm the one... not to be rude, but I'm the one who's coming from the north. And I know right away if they know what

they're talking about. And if they don't, they just heard it from a university book, either something else like that. That's what I know.

**VO:** Indigenous food sovereignty has to be led by Indigenous people. It can't be created in an ivory tower or legislated in Ottawa to be implemented by bureaucrats. Nutrition North Canada is a classic example of this. Remember the absurdly high cost of groceries I mentioned earlier? Nutrition North is a federal program whose sole purpose is to make food more affordable for Indigenous people in the North. But because the program is designed to subsidize retailer stores, the majority of the money goes to the companies like North West Company, a colonial corporation that was rivaling the Hudson Bay company in the fur trade 200 years ago and today has a near monopoly on grocery store outlets across the North. And when you see a \$166 bag of dog food or a \$27 jug of orange juice, many wonder whether these subsidies are making any measurable difference. Meanwhile, communities and individuals like Colleen who are trying to produce their own food are not even a part of the conversation.

This is why growing and hunting food is so important to Colleen. It's taking back an essential choice - the choice and ability to feed one's self and community.

**Colleen:** Up north, we're trying to come back slowly, how it was a long time ago. And you got to be strong. Yeah. Strong, like physically strong. That's why it's important to move and try to hurry up. That's where the muscles come from. I feel them now.

**Lyndsay:** Talk about how you respect the animal, thank the animal, after you catch that animal.

**Colleen:** I pray in my mind. I pray quietly, secretly say thank you. [speaks in Cree 00:19:29]. Or you could say [speaks in Cree 00:19:49]. Creator, our creator, [speaks in Cree 00:19:51], we give thanks to. And our ancestors, [speaks in Cree 00:20:02]. Or, spirit world, like heavens. Our ancestors, we thank them.

### **Circle of Life**

**VO:** For Colleen, giving thanks to Creator for the animal that gave its life for them also includes ensuring that the nothing is wasted. Even the bits that she can't use are food for other wildlife.

**Colleen:** So they'll eat it, they'll have food to eat. And the bones, they can chew on them and it's a healthy food for them.

**VO:** This consideration extends even to creatures she'd rather not think about.

**Colleen:** And maggots are supposed to be good for you on because they preserve the land and the earth. Maggots are disgusting, I can't stand them too myself. But still, it's like they're the savers of our soils those maggots. I see them, yesterday. I'm like... but I had to face it. These are maggots, they're here for a reason.

VO: Colleen has a lot on her plate, so to speak. She's studying social services at First Nations Technical Institute in addition to all of her food production work. [She also makes clear that she values learning through her own experiences in community leadership.] But there is one reason that has kept her going through it all, a reason that not only sews seeds for a better future, but also defies the legacy of colonialism.

Colleen: I've been training my boys ever since they were little.

Colleen: My boys. They're the reasons why we pull through a lot of stuff. They're young, they're healthy, they're strong. And I had to teach them though first all the time about safety, all the time. They're the ones that I keep me going, actually. That's why I'm doing... everything I do for them is for them. And my nephews, nieces, of course, the youth, that's a reason why for everything I do.

Colleen: I had a vision over here, but that's going to take years. I was going to make a kitchen over here and have a feast where people come together.

Colleen: Or I was going to make a dance too, where people love to dance. I love to dance, I like to sing. So I was going to make a dance hall here. And just for fun, because sometimes you all get stressed out too much. We need to have fun. How many times a month do we laugh?

VO: Winona Laduke, the legendary Anishinaabekwe activist, environmentalist, economist, and writer has stated, and I quote "the recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food, since food itself is medicine: not only for the body, but for the soul, for the spiritual connection to history, ancestors, and the land." - [Food Secure Canada](#)

VO: For Colleen and Bill and the growing number of communities who are taking their food systems back into their own hands, this rings true. "Recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food." Every goose smoked on the rack, every potato pulled from the earth, and every berry picked from the bush, is an act of defiance and hope. Defiance against the odds still stacked against them, and hope for a more abundant future harvest.

If you'd like to use this episode as a discussion tool for your classroom or church or community group, check out the show notes for a link to a discussion package that will help focus that conversation and provide additional resources.

I'd like to say Meegwetch to Colleen Hookimaw for hosting us on the land and for sharing your story and dreams with us. Meegwetch to Bill Louttit for his wisdom from decades of lived experience. Thanks to my colleagues Lyndsay Mollins Koene and Clara Wheaton who continue to nurture and grow fruitful relationships in the North.

A big thanks as always to Kindred Credit Union for their steadfast support of Undercurrents. Thank you to Christen Kong, sound mix by Francois Goudreault, original and theme music by Brian MacMillan and cover art by Jesse Bergen.

And thank YOU for listening. Stay tuned for our next episode coming out in August. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.



