

If Only the Rod Had Been Round

A life restored through faith, hope, love,
forgiveness, and a wonderful sense of
humor.

By Bridget Harris Volden

As told to Ruth Thielke

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All photographs are from Bridget Harris Volden's private collection, except for the picture of Bill Volden with his little dog Ginger and the picture of his mother and father's wedding. Those two pictures were donated by Bill's niece, Nancy Gilbertson, from the Volden family collection.

Cover Picture: Bridget and Nora leaving on the riverboat *Distributor* to spend nine months in the Indian residential boarding school at Fort Providence, 250 miles from their home.

ISBN 978-1-60458-477-6

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Published by InstantPublisher.com

InstantPublisher.com
P.O. Box 340, 410 Highway 72 West
Collierville TN 38027

Email: questions@instantpublisher.com

Phone: 1-800-259-2592
1-901-853-7070

First Publication, 2009

Printed in the United States of America

Preface

Most of the stories in this book are from my memory of people, places, and events. No one experiences life in exactly the same way as another person. There will be stories my family and friends recognize, but their recollection may be different than mine, and that is okay. It is those variations that create delightful conversations when we see each other and share our stories. Please read the stories with an open mind as I invite you to look at the life I experienced through my eyes.

Another important differentiation should be made between my painful experiences in the Catholic residential school and the way those schools are today. Much has happened in Canada to make changes in the way children are treated in the indigenous schools, especially in recent years.

Also, the Catholic church is not the same today as it was when I was a child. I am thankful to those I learned to know in the Catholic church over the years who treated me with genuine love and kindness as they reflect the life they found in Jesus.

- Bridget Volden -

The University of Minnesota, Morris is mentioned in this book as a point of interest. In the late 1800's their campus was the grounds of an Indian residential school with some similarities to the school at Fort Providence that Bridget Harris Volden attended as a young girl. The University of Minnesota in compliance with Equal Opportunity places the same value on all religions and creeds.

Among our nation's many strengths, is the freedom of religion protected in our constitution's Bill of Rights. Each citizen has the freedom to choose and practice their religious faith. As an individual Bridget's description of her Christian faith which is rich and meaningful, has had a profound effect in her personal life. After the children of Israel came out of Egypt, as Joshua¹ was about to lead them across the Jordan River, he said, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Bridget and I have each chosen to serve the same Lord, who called his son Jesus.

- Ruth Thielke -

¹ Joshua 24:15, *NIV*

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who have worked together to make this book possible. Thanks to my nephew Gary Gilbertson for introducing me to Ruth and Neil Thielke. Thanks to Neil for encouraging me to write this book, and for allowing his wife Ruth to tape and transcribe our conversations, put our conversations into story form, and researched for documented information about my dad and other details in the book. Thanks for Gary's sister, Nancy Gilbertson, for hosting Ruth last summer when she attended the writer's conference. Thanks to Mary Lou Potts for going the extra mile beyond helping me with business affairs, to helping in so many other ways, including hosting Ruth on some of her visits to Helena, Montana as we continued to work on the book. Thanks to Mary Lou, Ruth's sister Jeannine Churchill and Ruth's friends Karla Klinger and Steve Granger who served as readers spotting so many details that needed attention in the book's early draft. Thank you, Kit and Debbie Elford, for hosting us as we were putting the final touches on the book. Thank you, Kit, for reading the book, and making so many helpful comments. Your experience in book publishing has been so valuable! Thank you to my sister Rose for visiting with us and supplying some delightful stories from growing up together and as adults. Thank you to Nora and her daughters for helping check some of the details about our family. I couldn't have written this without all of you.

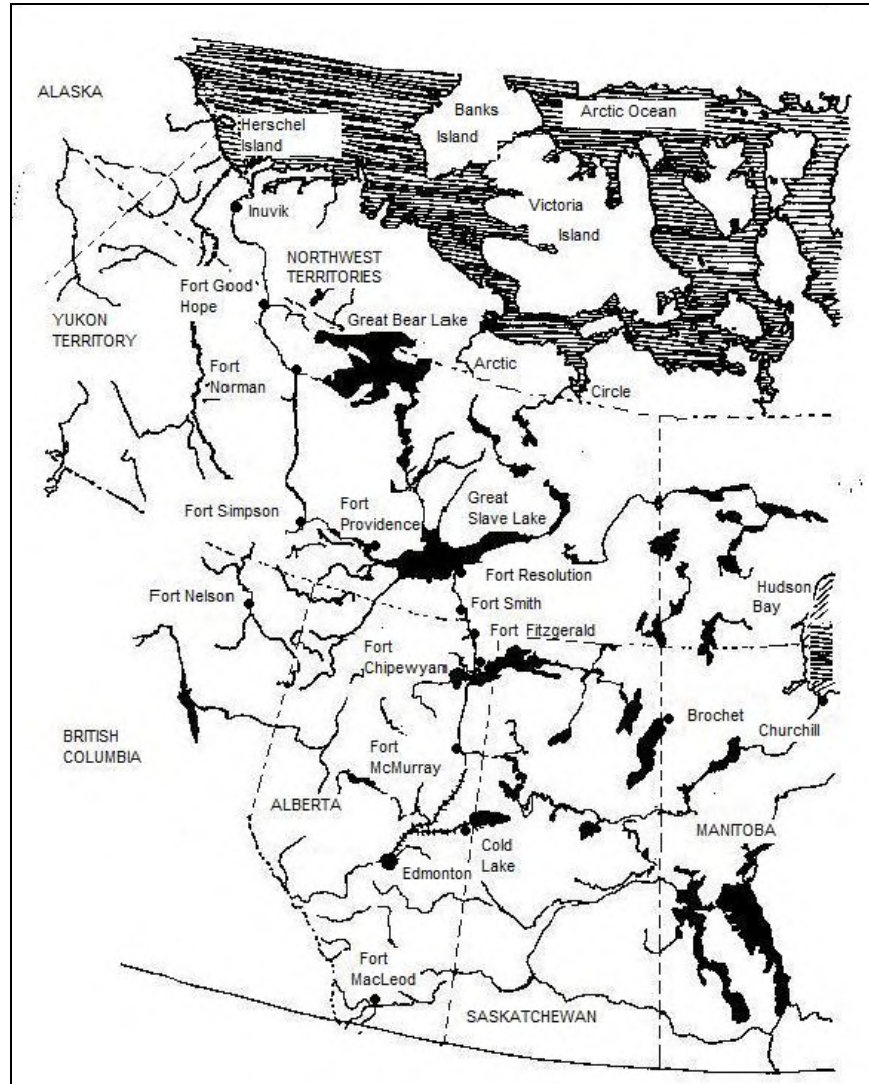
There are also many people who have supported me throughout my lifetime, including employers who believed I could do more than I thought of myself. I am thankful to my family who provided me with such a good home to grow up in, and so much love and support throughout my lifetime. I am so thankful for my husband Bill, the best lifetime companion I could have ever imagined. Thank you to Rose Kostashen and her mother for providing me with family life and a place to live when I needed them most. In my churches in Minneapolis, Great Falls, and Helena I have had so many loving, supportive friends. Thank you to all who helped with The American Indian Bible Fellowship, especially the Macketys, Art Holmes, and John Bobolink, as well as those who served on the board of directors, and those who helped serve meals and with cleanup. Thank you to the pastors of Augustana Lutheran Church who allowed those

meetings to be held in the church fellowship hall, especially Pastor William Berg and John Bohnsack. Special thanks to all of my friends in Alcoholics Anonymous who supported me through many struggles and have always *been there for me*. I couldn't have made it without all of you.

I am especially thankful to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave me new life when mine was broken, who gave me hope for a better tomorrow, and who filled my heart with love when I thought I was totally empty.

- Bridget Harris Volden

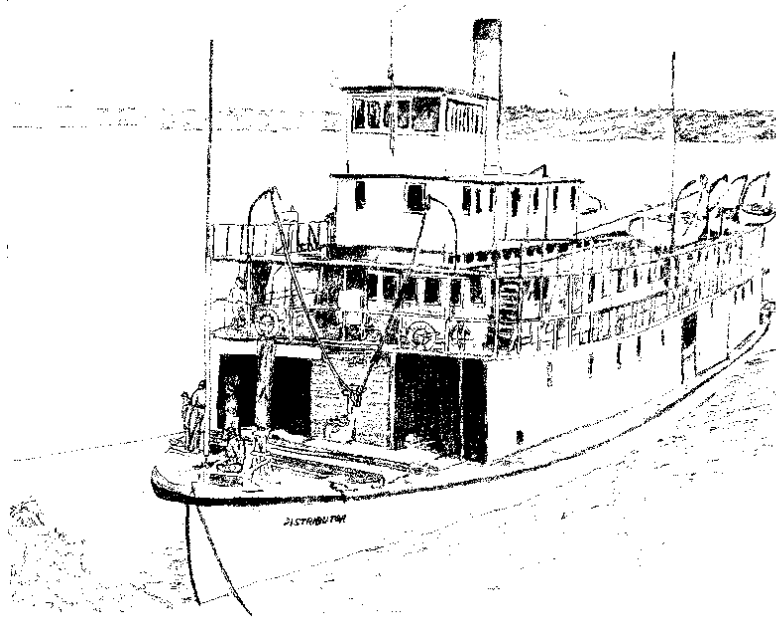
Map of North and Western Canada²



² Map sketched by Ruth Thielke

Foreword

by Ruth Thielke



Brisk gusts frothed the tips of the waves against the current on the Mackenzie as the riverboat *The Distributor*³ was loaded for the last trip up river in the summer of 1927. The four-level stern wheeler had compartments for the passengers on the two lower decks with stairways from deck to deck. Life rafts hung over the sides on the second deck. Above the second deck was a smaller room where the crew and passengers could observe the country. Above the observation deck was the captain's deck. The engine was chugging in port ready to turn the paddles that would send the boat eastward toward the river's source at Great Slave Lake.

The most precious cargo were two frightened little Harris girls, Bridget age eight and her sister Nora age six, making their first voyage to the Fort Providence Indian Residential School (IRS). Their older brother Jim age ten was along on the trip, but he would be taken to the boys' side of the school once they arrived. The children were traveling over two hundred fifty miles away from their parents.

³ Pencil drawing by Ruth Thielke from photograph.

Jim, Bridget, and Nora would be frozen in for nine long months where the sun barely creeps over the tree tops in the deep of winter.

Had the children been with their father on his summer visits to the villages along the 2,500 miles of the Mackenzie River, they would have been bursting with excitement. But their frightened hearts were breaking as they were separated from their protective father and their gentle loving mother. Josette Harris, the children's mother, was of the Chipewyan Tribe near Cold Lake, Alberta. Their father, T. W. (Flynn) Harris was of Irish descent, and served for twenty years as an Indian Agent in Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories where he became the Commissioner of Treaty 11.

Mr. Harris paid tuition for his children to attend the Catholic IRS in Fort Providence because there were no other schools along the Mackenzie River. Although many of the children were abused at the school, Bridget seemed to have been singled out for prolonged harsh treatment at the hands of the Grey Nuns. Bridget tells of the things she suffered between the ages of eight to thirteen at the residential school later in this book.

In 1957 a principal on a review board of Indian Residential Schools made the following observation of the Fort Providence IRS, "I would sooner have a child of mine in a reform school than in this dreadful institution⁴."

When Bridget appeared before the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2006⁵, the adjudicator's evaluation of Bridget's spoken testimony stated:

Mrs. Volden claims that she was physically abused while in attendance at Fort Providence IRS. Further, that the physical injuries lasted more than six weeks and . . . should have led to hospitalization or serious medical treatment by a physician and permanent or demonstrated long-term physical injury. I find, on the balance of probability, that Mrs. Volden was physically assaulted while in attendance at Fort Providence IRS. I find . . . wrongful confinement and a physical assault resulting in long-term physical injury. Mrs. Volden is an elder of eighty-seven years. She gave her evidence in a straightforward and eloquent manner and responded

⁴ 216. NAC RG85, volume 1224, file 630/110-3 (6), To R.G Robertson from..., 19 November 1957. Correspondent not identified for reasons of confidentiality.

⁵ On June 29, 2006, at the age of 87 years, Bridget (Harris) Volden was invited by the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, to testify of possible wrongful treatment at the Indian residential school in Fort Providence.

to all questions in a forthright and honest manner. This adjudicator was never, throughout the course of her evidence, led to believe that she embellished or exaggerated her evidence. I found her recollection of persons, places and events to be remarkable. I accept Mrs. Volden's evidence as trustworthy and credible. All parties present at the hearing were struck with the intensity of her recollection of particularly disturbing memories.

June 11, 2008 was an historic day in Canadian History as Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a public statement of apology in the House of Commons of the Canadian Parliament for treatment of indigenous children and their separation from their families and villages in the IRS system. The prime minister's apology representing the Canadian government and the response of Phil Fontaine, National Chief of Canada, representing the people of the First Nations of Canada was an important step toward healing the wounds inflicted by the boarding schools.

Prime Minister Harper's apology marked a significant new beginning for Canada, but as National Chief Fontaine stated in his response to the apology, there is still much work to be done. The benefits of the apology can only be achieved as future generations continue to build bridges of appreciation, honor, respect, understanding and forgiveness between cultures. On that historic day in the House of Commons of the Canadian Parliament, several people from the First Nations bravely shared their stories of the abuse they had suffered while attending an IRS.

The full text of Prime Minister Harper's speech is provided in the appendix of this book by permission. Also in the appendix is the text of National Chief Fontaine's response given immediately following the Prime Minister's apology.

When Bridget at eighty-nine years of age heard of the Prime Minister's apology she burst into tears. Then she said, "This will help the healing begin for my people."

Bridget tells her story of the abuses she suffered at the Fort Providence IRS, the painful memories that led to her alcoholism, and of overcoming fears and bitterness as she allowed Jesus to heal her hurts. Healing from residual pain continues today as Bridget turns her memories over to the One who suffered for her on the cross so long ago, providing forgiveness not only for Bridget, but for her tormenters as well.

We Are Introduced to Bridget

By Ruth Thielke

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
Where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121:1-3 (NIV)

“You should write a book. I love your story. I think it is better than what people dream up and write in fiction books, because it is a true story and it’s an incredible story! Not only that, it’s a human interest story. People are interested in indigenous peoples and their assimilation into other cultures. It’s like God is saying, ‘Bridget, your life has meaning!’” my husband Neil exclaimed.

Bridget (Harris) Volden was sharing her experiences growing up in Fort Simpson in the Northwest Territories. Her life journey has taken her from Fort Simpson, to the Fort Providence IRS, and to Fort Good Hope, in the Northwest Territories; to Cold Lake and to Edmonton, in Alberta; to Brooklyn, New York; to Minneapolis, Minnesota; to Cedar Rapids, Iowa; back to Minneapolis; and then out to Great Falls and Helena, Montana

“I have thought of writing a book some day,” Bridget said, “and I know what the title would be: *If Only the Rod Had Been Round.*”

“Why would you pick that title?” Neil asked.

“Because the rod the nuns beat me with in the boarding school when I was a little girl was square, and it hurt so badly when they hit me,” Bridget explained hoisting her sleeve to expose her disfigured left wrist. “See that wrist?” Bridget asked. “One of the nuns beat me until my wrist broke because I was left-handed. She made sure I never used that hand again. The fracture was never set because we didn’t have doctors at the school. It was like being in *prison.*”

“Remember, in the beginning I didn’t know Jesus. I knew a God of fear only. When I was in the Catholic boarding school I never knew that God really cared for me, forgave me - all that. I often say that if the white people had taken the time to really know the Indian people who lived on this land from the beginning of time, to learn their language, to understand how they lived, we could have all gotten along. Instead the whites had the attitude, ‘I don’t like your braids. You have to cut them off and put on this uniform!’ They tried to take the *Indian-ness* out of the Indian people. Even the nuns, who

were supposed to bring the love of Jesus, tried to change the Indian culture instead of just allowing Jesus to change our hearts with his love.”

Neil suggested, “Let’s open with prayer, and then we want to hear how your heart was changed as you came to know the Creator God who loves you.” Neil prayed, “Lord, we thank you today for Bridget. Thank you for that little Indian gal from the Northwest Territories who went through indescribable pain. In the midst of all that, Jesus, you had a part to play in her life that goes beyond her. You have allowed her to tell other people that story, because it’s important to you, Lord. We ask, Lord, that you will help us to be aware of your unseen hand. We pray that her story will be more than just her story, but also Your story of what You were doing in her life. We ask, Lord, that you will be here in the room with us as the story unfolds, bringing things to mind for Bridget to tell. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Bridget’s life springs from the story of her mother’s and father’s marriage, which took place as their two cultures were being forged together to form the nation of Canada. Flynn and Josette Harris’s children were born at the time when the Canadian government was enacting laws for the process of assimilation in the schools, empowering educators to take the *Indian-ness* out of the Indian children to turn them into Canadian citizens. It was through the children the Canadian government expected that change to occur. Indian children were to be separated from their parents and placed into boarding schools that would not only educate, but also *Christianize* the students. What the government meant by *Christianization* was unquestioning adherence to rules and forms of behavior, not the discovery of Jesus’ love for them that would change hearts and set their spirits free from shame and condemnation. Bridget’s parents were unwitting participants in that process until they discovered the damage that was occurring in Bridget’s young life.

Bridget’s story only begins with her boarding school experiences, however. The beatings Bridget suffered at the school played a large role in her ongoing struggle with alcoholism. In her young adult life, Bridget turned to alcohol to block the memories of the beatings at the boarding school.

But Bridget’s story is also one of forgiveness and restoration. Bridget’s life was restored and her marriage renewed when she and her husband Bill turned their lives over to Jesus. Bridget and Bill

Volden were able to forgive each other, to share their love for Jesus with each other, and to pray and read their Bibles together. Their relationship with God and with each other began to bring joy into their lives.

Neil and I were introduced to Bridget by her husband's nephew, Gary Gilbertson, a longtime friend of ours. Neil and Gary are fellow pastors in the True Bridge network of non-denominational churches out of Eden Prairie, Minnesota.⁶ Neil and Gary became even closer friends teaching together in a school of ministry in central Siberia for five weeks in 1996.

Bridget's husband, Bill Volden grew up in Morris, Minnesota, across the street from our house. When Bill died in 2004, Bridget followed Bill's instructions and arranged for his burial next to his mother's grave in Summit Cemetery at Morris, Minnesota. When Bridget flew from Helena, Montana, to Minneapolis, Gary brought her to Morris. En route Gary called his friend Neil to request help in locating the grave site. Even in this, God was watching out for Bridget.

Neil and I knew how to find the cemetery, which is at the end of our block right next to the University of Minnesota, Morris campus. But we didn't have the foggiest idea where to begin to look for Bill's grave! As Gary parked his car, we noticed the caretaker of the cemetery working close by. The caretaker certainly noticed Gary, who drives a converted hearse for transporting young people to ministry functions. The caretaker had the map of the cemetery in his truck, and was able to walk us right to the place where Bill had been buried.

Bridget took time to remember Bill, talking to him as if he was present in spirit, and shedding her tears beside Bill's grave. Although Bridget didn't have much of an appetite, we accompanied Gary and Bridget for lunch at Don's Café in downtown Morris, famous for its gargantuan home-cooked meals. Over lunch, Bridget told of growing up along the Mackenzie River where her Irish father had been known as *The Famous Flynn Harris*. Bridget's mother was from the Chipewyan First Nations band on the Onion Lake Reserve near Cold Lake, Alberta.

⁶ Neil Thielke is the founding pastor of Morris Community Church; Morris, Minnesota. Gary Gilbertson was the head pastor of New Covenant Church in Northfield, Minnesota, for many years before starting Prepare Campus Ministries, whose offices are at City Hill Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

Bridget's father-in-law, Ed Volden, was Business Manager and Registrar of the University of Minnesota's West Central School and Experiment Station (fondly known as the *Ag School*) in Morris for forty years from 1915 to 1955.

Bridget's story intrigued me. Before my retirement in 2005, I had been Registrar at the four-year liberal arts campus of the University of Minnesota that replaced the *Ag School*. Until she met us that day, Bridget didn't know the campus of the University of Minnesota, Morris was originally the site of the Morris Indian School started by the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic order, in 1887. Bridget attended a Catholic residential school as a child, but her school was very different.

In the early stages of providing education for Indian children to fulfill treaty obligations, as in Canada, the United States government welcomed help from churches. Most of the students in the Morris Indian School came from the Turtle Mountain Ojibwa tribe located near Pembina, ND. The Morris Indian School was run so well by the Sisters of Mercy there were no incidents of abuse or of the children running away. Corporal punishment of any kind was not allowed; the children were well fed and looked after. Parents willingly enrolled their students, even though they were far from home. The Sisters of Mercy were commended in 1895 by the Office of Indian Affairs for a job well done. Nonetheless, in 1896 in the midst of a nation-wide financial recession, the Sisters of Mercy had to sell the school for lack of funding.

The only available purchaser for the Morris Indian School was the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) in the federal government. The school was not well administered under the OIA. As enrollment declined, students were not allowed to return home for holidays or vacations in an effort to retain them. This only angered parents who found other schools for their children to attend, causing enrollments to fall even further.

The OIA replaced their first superintendent with a man who rehired the Indian staff, and was able to make improvements in the administration of the school. Problems with low enrollment continued, however, as schools became available on reservations, and a school similar to the Morris Indian School was built at Wahpeton, North Dakota. The Wahpeton school was much closer to the students' homes.

The main reason for the Morris Indian School closing its doors was lack of finances that were ultimately enrollment related due to

reasons stated above. On March 3, 1909,⁷ the U.S. Congress deeded the Morris Indian School to the State of Minnesota on the condition “that Indian pupils shall at all times be admitted to school free of charge for tuition and on terms of equality with white students.”⁸

In 1910 the West Central School of Agriculture (WCSA) began and continued until 1963. The college at the University of Minnesota, Morris campus started in the fall of 1960 and today is one of the leading four-year public liberal arts colleges in the nation. Many Native Americans from across the United States have completed their Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Minnesota, Morris, utilizing the tuition waiver provided by the 1909 Congressional transfer of the Morris Indian School to the State of Minnesota.

Bridget’s father-in-law Ed Volden never mentioned either the Morris Indian School that preceded the Ag School or the tuition waiver for Indian students. If he had, Bridget would have felt an immediate bond with her father-in-law. Perhaps Ed made no mention of the Indian school, because the tuition waiver was not widely publicized during the time of the Ag School. Although the Morris Indian School had once been the largest Indian residential school in Minnesota, only two Indian students attended the Ag School from 1910 to 1963.

After her husband died in 2004, Bridget came back to Morris to visit her Billy’s grave each year. Each year Bridget joined us for lunch while we heard more of her story. When my husband Neil asked Bridget how her book was coming, the answer was always the same; she was having difficulty getting started. In May of 2007, Neil asked Bridget if I could help write her story. Bridget thought that might move things forward.

In one conversation, Bridget told us, “They called my papa *The Famous Flynn Harris*.”

“What made him famous?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Bridget said, “We just called him *Papa*.”

Writers in the early 1900’s were eager to capture the excitement of the vast unexplored regions of Canada. Bridget remembers her father, T. W. (Flynn) Harris, was approached by authors and

⁷ While Ruth Thielke was Registrar, she was proactive in protecting the integrity of the tuition waiver. Ruth graduated from the campus in 1969, began working there in 1971, and served as Registrar from 1978-2005.

⁸ History of the Morris Indian School is from Wilbert H. Ahern - “Indian Education and Bureaucracy: The School at Morris, 1887-1909,” *Minnesota History*, 49 (1984), pp. 84-98.

journalists who wanted to write his story. Flynn turned them away by saying, "If my story is to be written, it will be written by one of my children someday." In the opening chapters of her book, Bridget fulfills that aspect of her Papa's desires.

This book contains Flynn's story as the backdrop for Bridget's life story. Flynn fought a war of diplomacy in Parliament alongside his friend Bishop Breynat defending the Indian people as the westward movement of European settlers threatened the Indian way of life. Bridget learned from her father's courage and leadership to overcome her fears in the face of life's challenges.

Bridget's story is also a story of salvation and healing as God rescued one of his beloved children from destruction. At a breaking point in her marriage, Bridget discovered God's love in her most desperate hour. As Bridget talked to the living Christ, Jesus delivered her from her addiction to alcohol. God turned evil into good in Bridget's life as she entrusted her life to Jesus. In gratitude, Bridget shared her new freedom in Jesus with as many people as she could. God inspired Bridget to help establish the American Indian Bible Fellowship in downtown Minneapolis which she led for ten years.

Now as Bridget has reached her ninetieth year, it is her hope that Indians and non-Indians alike will read her story and find freedom in Jesus, so that her story can be forever entwined not only in HIS story, but in yours as well.