

## **Transcript of Interview with Margaret Geddes by Padraic Cohen**

**Interviewee:** Margaret Geddes

**Interviewer:** Padraic Cohen

**Date:** 3/13/2021

**Location (Interviewee):** Cochrane, Alberta Canada

**Location (Interviewer):** Cochrane, Alberta Canada

**Transcriber:** Padraic Cohen

**Abstract:** In this oral history, I interviewed my grandmother, Margaret Geddes on her pandemic experience as a senior. In particular, Margaret spoke about her youth growing up in rural southern Alberta, Calgary. Margaret grew up from a Roman Catholic family and she reflects on how religion changed for her throughout the course of the pandemic, as she was unable to go to person masses; ultimately she believes her faith had been strengthened due to the pandemic. She also spoke about her experience with a prominent polio outbreak in Calgary in the 1950s and draws some interesting comparisons to the current pandemic. Margaret also goes onto speak about her experience with the COVID-19 vaccination, and shares her thoughts on the what it was like to sign up, receive and prepare for her next vaccination . She also spoke about how long she believes the pandemic will go on for, and how she will remain masking in public as a result of the pandemic skeptics out there.

**Padraic Cohen 0:01**

Hi, my name is Padraic Cohen, and I'm a graduate student intern with the COVID-19 archive at ASU. The date is May 13th 2021. And the time is 5:19pm. And I'm speaking with my grandma Margaret, Geddes. I want to ask you a question about your pandemic experience. Before I do, I'd like to ask for your consent to record this response to the COVID-19 archive. The COVID-19 archive is a digital archive at ASU that is collecting pandemic experiences. Do I have your consent to record your response and add it to the archive with your name?

**Margaret Geddes 0:29**

Yes.

**Padraic Cohen 0:29**

Thank you. So thank you for taking the time on your day for speaking to me today in the first place. And just to begin, I want to ask you some background questions. So number one, how are you doing today?

**Margaret Geddes 0:39**

I'm fine. Thank you.

**Padraic Cohen 0:40**

All right. And how old are you?

**Margaret Geddes 0:43**

How old am I?

**Padraic Cohen 0:44**

Yep.

**Margaret Geddes 0:44**

I'm 86.

**Padraic Cohen 0:47**

Can you tell me a little bit about your family, or just...

**Margaret Geddes 0:50**

My family? My children or my only family I come from?

**Padraic Cohen 0:55**

Um, we could- how about your family come from first and then your children.

**Margaret Geddes 1:01**

I came from a family of English people. My father was from Liverpool, England. And he was a first World War veteran. And my mother was from a farming community in Alberta. And we were raised in the country. We didn't live in the city. When I was very young, we lived in the city for a short while. But when I was growing up, we lived in the country. We went to a country school, went to church that was in the country, and we walk all the time. We walk everywhere. The summer that I remember distinctly...

**Padraic Cohen 1:38**

Oh, I- Okay, sorry. Go ahead.

**Margaret Geddes 1:41**

Okay. I remember that the summers being hot, and probably running barefoot a lot. And just being around the house and walking to the store. And maybe some of the older people in the district would have grandchildren come to stay for the summers; we had new friends. I remember the cold winters. Remember not being able to go to church when it was really, really cold. Remember we only went to town probably once or twice a month. My mother used to go once a week to get a few supplies. We didn't have a refrigerator, so she had to go probably once a week to get fresh meat or whatever she was getting. As I got a little bit older, I had a paper route, had 21 papers. Had to walk, I would say, a good six miles round trip, if not more. In the winter and summer, hot weather, really cold weather, never bothered me a bit. Just take my time. Just everybody knew everybody else. You weren't terribly close, but everybody knew their neighbors, and then kind of knew what they were doing or what they should be doing. What shouldn't be doing. There's a lot of gossip um.. that's about it.

**Padraic Cohen 3:11**

When was this?

**Margaret Geddes 3:12**

That would be in the 1940s.

**Padraic Cohen 3:14**

Okay, and so, do you have any children?

**Margaret Geddes 3:17**

Did- did, I have three sisters.

**Padraic Cohen 3:20**

No, no, I meant like, did you- did you have any children?

**Margaret Geddes 3:22**

Oh, when I got married, I had children. I had eight children. Yeah.

**Padraic Cohen 3:27**

Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about them because I...

**Margaret Geddes 3:32**

My children, they were all born very close together. They're all really good children. They had to behave. We didn't spoil them. We didn't have a lot of money. They were just good people. And they did a lot of things on their own. They're- hung out with your friends. Didn't have a lot of special things, didn't have a lot of money. So you didn't do much.

**Padraic Cohen 4:04**

I don't think I've asked you this, but what's your- what's your birthday? Sorry.

**Margaret Geddes 4:07**

September 19, 1934.

**Padraic Cohen 4:10**

Okay, thank you. So now we're gonna move on to, I guess, the- the current, current time. So what does your typical day look like to you before COVID? Like, do you remember what you did on a daily basis?

**Margaret Geddes 4:21**

Before COVID?

**Padraic Cohen 4:22**

Yeah.

**Margaret Geddes 4:23**

Well, I worked for a while. And- and then I looked after my little grandson for a while. And then I moved back into the city. And I moved in with my son. And I kind of looked after the house and made meals. And after my husband died, I had sold the home place. I didn't want to stay there anymore when he was gone. I'm just kind of involved in church, but that's about it. I'm not a big people person, so...

**Padraic Cohen 4:57**

So, like what do you do? Like do you knit or daily things...

**Margaret Geddes 5:03**

I do some just little- little projects. I do a lot of reading, like to read.

**Padraic Cohen 5:09**

You don't get out a lot or just mostly stay in the house?

**Margaret Geddes 5:11**

Mostly stay in the house, yeah.

**Padraic Cohen 5:13**

Okay.

**Margaret Geddes 5:14**

I don't drive. So when I- when I was able to walk out, I'd go to the shopping center quite often; I was always walking wherever. Now, as I'm older, I don't walk very well. So I don't go anywhere unless my daughter takes me.

**Padraic Cohen 5:28**

And then now with COVID, has any of that changed?

**Margaret Geddes 5:32**

With COVID, I pretty much stayed at the house, didn't really mix with anybody. We didn't have a lot of people come in. Any special occasions, we had postpone them, because we didn't want to take a chance because we didn't understand what this COVID thing was, and a little bit fearful of it.

**Padraic Cohen 5:53**

And um, can you tell me about the first time you heard about COVID, then?

**Margaret Geddes 5:56**

The first time I heard about COVID was probably in March of 2020. We'd heard rumors of a disease in China, but didn't pay a lot of attention to it because China's a long way away and didn't think about people traveling, just kind of ignored it. And pretty soon via the news, you heard that

it was here and got thinking, What is it? Was it going to stay a long time is it going to go quickly? And because nobody knew a lot about it, you began to get fearful.

**Padraic Cohen 6:31**

Oh, and what has changed the most for you, you'd say after the pandemic began?

**Margaret Geddes 6:37**

After the pandemic, just the fact that you had to be so careful when you went anywhere if you went for groceries, and you were not able to go to church, not able to go to the shopping centers. First, if you had to go for groceries- when it first started, we went as far as having the groceries delivered or picked up by somebody else. And then bit by bit we started to go out maybe once or twice a month to the grocery store, wearing a mask all the time. Yeah, so...

**Padraic Cohen 7:07**

Okay, so you did mention church. So now I'd like to ask questions about religion if that's okay.

**Margaret Geddes 7:13**

Yeah, go ahead.

**Padraic Cohen 7:14**

Um, so firstly, what is your faith?

**Margaret Geddes 7:17**

I'm Roman Catholic.

**Padraic Cohen 7:19**

Okay. With the onset of the pandemic, how did a attending mass change for you?

**Margaret Geddes 7:24**

It changed because they had very strict rules of going to church, you had to make an appointment. At first it was closed down completely. And then bit by bit, they would allow a few people in but you had to make reservations. And because the bishop said, you could stay home and watch the mass on the television or the YouTube. And that would be fine. That was a dispensation. You didn't- it wasn't a sin to miss mass. So I chose that and haven't been to church since that's a year. Since I've been to church.

**Padraic Cohen 8:02**

Did you have any- any difficulties accessing mass online, like on YouTube? You don't struggle at all with it?

**Margaret Geddes 8:06**

Not a bit a bit. No, no. I actually, I found I've learned a lot more about my religion than I ever did before. So...

**Padraic Cohen 8:15**

Okay, thank you. Can you tell me how the restrictions against in person masses firstly made you feel then because you said it wasn't a sin. But did you have any...

**Margaret Geddes 8:25**

No, I didn't. The bishop said it was okay. So that if he says it's okay, it's fine with me. I listened to what he said.

**Padraic Cohen 8:32**

Okay. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what you mean by you feel like you learned more?

**Margaret Geddes 8:37**

Oh, because I guess you call me a cradle Catholic, but my religious learning was very, very, very limited. My mother was an Anglican. And she's the one that took us to church. And after a while, she was disillusioned with it, so she quit going. But still there's something about it that light, then I drew away from it for a long time. And as I got older, I realized that that's what I needed. And I missed it. And I went back and from daily mass watching it on YouTube, I've learned a lot, a lot about the Bible a lot about the history of the church, a lot about the different people that were in the church and a lot about Jesus Himself. Yeah, I'm quite- quite pleased with what I've learned.

**Padraic Cohen 9:32**

That's good. So you'd say like your strength has been- I mean, your faith has been strengthened, probably?

**Margaret Geddes 9:37**

I would say so. Yes, very much. Yeah.

**Padraic Cohen 9:39**

Okay.

**Margaret Geddes 9:39**

And because I'm older that you realize you're at the end of your life, and there's a reckoning so you have to get ready for that. Yeah.

**Padraic Cohen 9:48**

Okay. Thank you. One more thing. I don't think I asked you this outright, but I think you mentioned it. Do you remember the last time you were at public mass or in person?

**Margaret Geddes 10:01**

A year ago. Probably more than a year ago. Yeah. And that was right before the pandemic

**Padraic Cohen 10:06**

Yeah. And that was right before the pandemic, or was that during?

**Margaret Geddes 10:06**

Just when the pandemic started. When it- when it was here and we knew it was here in Calgary, and I began talking about statistics and things like that, then I realized, no, you can't go anymore.

**Padraic Cohen 10:18**

Okay. Another thing. So, currently there are numerous in person masses being hosted around the province, many of which are overcapacity, and in violation of health and safety codes. What do you think of these gatherings?

**Margaret Geddes 10:31**

I think that's wrong. If they tell you that it's not a good idea for people to gather together, you should take that wisdom because they've already proved that when you are in close, I guess, space with other people, then the virus is stronger and more of a barrel and it transfers easier. So I think it's wrong for people to dismiss it and think that it doesn't count. Yeah.

**Padraic Cohen 11:02**

Sorry, I did miss a really important question. I just want to bring it up before we go back to the religion. Where do you live and what is it like to live there? Sorry. This is really quick. I'm sorry.

**Margaret Geddes 11:11**

I live at my son's house, my eldest son, and it's fine. He gives me kind of my own freedom. I do whatever I like when I like. And he is retired now, so of course, he's there more often. And I'm responsible for more meals than I was previously, but it's fine. It works out okay.

**Padraic Cohen 11:33**

Okay. And where is this like geographically?

**Margaret Geddes 11:35**

It's in Calgary. Queensland in Calgary.

**Padraic Cohen 11:37**

All right. Now, going back to the religion, when do you think it'll be safe having person masses again?

**Margaret Geddes 11:45**

I honestly don't know, I'm waiting for the bishop, and the bishop follows the health rules. I'm hoping to go before Easter, probably as a private appointment, if possible. Have to wait and see. I just play it by ear until then see what happens.

**Padraic Cohen 12:05**

How do you set up those appointments, is it online or?

**Margaret Geddes 12:08**

You phone the church and ask if it's possible for you to come and go to confession, and they make an appointment and you come and you sit quite far apart from the priest. And as far as Holy Communion goes, you do have to go to mass for Holy Communion. But that's something I'll have to deal with when the time comes to.

**Padraic Cohen 12:28**

Okay. So I'd like to move on to the next part. That's all right. And this is- so last month, I interviewed you during the silver lining interview. And you mentioned that you lived through a polio outbreak in Calgary. So can you tell me a little bit about that?

**Margaret Geddes 12:42**

What I remember of that, and this was during the 1940s. And there was a big outbreak in the 1950s. But the one that stays in my mind was the 1940s because I was very young. And I remember the hot, hot summer days. And my mother would say, "You can't go downtown, you can't go to a theater, you can't go on a streetcar, you can't go in a swimming pool." We didn't swim anyway. But we had to stay away from everybody. And we didn't quite understand why. But then we used to get the newspaper, and the newspaper would be talking about the people that had contacted polio, and how many of the children were crippled and how many of them were in iron lungs. And that was enough to give you the fear. So you didn't really want to be near anybody anyway. And by the fall, once the day started to get cool, the virus seemed to die out. And you forgot about it.

**Padraic Cohen 13:41**

So it was like a seasonal thing?

**Margaret Geddes 13:42**

Yeah. And then in the 1950s, it came back with a vengeance in our family. I remember when one of my daughters was born, my sister in law looked after the other children. And when she left her house, after I got home with a new baby, she left and took her children out to Chestermere Lake. And while they were out there, her daughter contacted polio. And I think she would let her children swim in Chestermere Lake. And at that time that was contaminated that people used to dump raw sewage into the lake. And polio is caused by the virus from fecal matter. And she must have got it in her mouth, as you've had- you can either breathe it in through your nose or you swallow it, and her throat was paralyzed. And she did- she didn't have to be in an iron lung that I remember. But she was very, very, very sick, and they weren't sure that she was going to live. A lot of the children who got the virus and the virus got into the bloodstream and into their spinal cord and everything, they couldn't breathe, so they had to go in iron lungs in the end, and the lung would breathe for them. What I remember is the crippling effects of the polio. The people that I did know that had polio were crippled forever. Their legs never ever worked again, some of their hands never worked.

**Padraic Cohen 15:12**

How many people did you know catch the virus?

**Margaret Geddes 15:15**

Yeah, my- my niece. Yeah, she had polio. And her- her- her mouth was always crooked after that, because she had polio in her throat. And it affected her windpipe and her face.

**Padraic Cohen 15:32**

Okay. So just- just one person, then just...

**Margaret Geddes 15:35**

I knew a girl that I worked with in the government office. And this would be about 1952 to 1953. And she contracted polio from somewhere, but I never didn't learn where. And she was completely paralyzed. And she never ever walked again, without aid of the- the, of that big walking sticks or walking out kind of machine. And her hand, she couldn't use her hand, she had to do everything with like, a pencil in her mouth and things like that.

**Padraic Cohen 16:09**

So I'm not really familiar with like polio that well, because I mean, I've never experienced this-

**Margaret Geddes 16:13**

It's a crippling disease, yes.

**Padraic Cohen 16:15**

Yeah. Were there like any precautions taken to avoid contracting apart from going too late?

**Margaret Geddes 16:21**

They closed the school grounds [phone buzzes]. They closed the theaters. They, as far as I know, swimming pools were close, although I can't remember them saying that swimming pools were closed. But I would imagine that that's what they would have done because everything else was closed down to children. And everybody tried to keep their children at home as much as possible.

**Padraic Cohen 16:45**

Like, I'm sorry, if I- were there any maskings or any personal protective equipment that anyone would wear? Or was it just completely isolation?

**Margaret Geddes 16:53**

No, no. Just- just isolation

**Padraic Cohen 16:55**

Okay. Was that difficult then?

**Margaret Geddes 16:58**

Not for us because we were living in the country, and we were kind of isolated anyway. And no, it didn't affect me that much at all.

**Padraic Cohen 17:10**

Here... so you mentioned the '40s and the '50s were the big ones, basically, because I remember-

**Margaret Geddes 17:16**

There were- I guess, historically, when I looked it up, it said that 1920s in the 1950s when they had the huge epidemics. The 1940s that I recall, were- were not very good, no.

**Padraic Cohen 17:33**

In particular, in 1953, was the worst on record with the estimated 11,000 left paralyzed, remember that one in particular?

**Margaret Geddes 17:41**

I do believe that's correct. And that's when the girl that I worked with contracted polio, and she must have been in the swimming pool or something. I'm not sure where she got it. I never did ask her that.

**Padraic Cohen 17:53**

Okay. Let me see. So the vaccine around this time came out in the mid-1950s. Did you receive that?

**Margaret Geddes 18:02**

I think we did. But I don't recall getting it. Personally, I don't recall that. I was working. And I don't recall getting it at all. But I know that it was there for- I think they focused mostly on younger children at that time. Okay.

**Padraic Cohen 18:19**

So speaking of vaccines, then we can move on to your recent experience with the vaccine, would you want to talk about that?

**Margaret Geddes 18:27**

Yes, I did receive a first vaccination of the Pfizer vaccine. I was a little apprehensive, and then I actually was glad when it was over. It wasn't difficult at all. Standing in line was difficult, but that's about it. I think it's better to have the vaccine than not to have it. And there's a lot of naysayers. And they're saying, "Well, you don't know the outcome of this vaccine. You don't know what it's going to be 10 years from now," but I probably won't have to worry about that. But I think it's better to give it a try.

**Padraic Cohen** 19:04

Can you tell me about the registration process? Was it difficult at all?

**Margaret Geddes** 19:07

Not for me. My daughter register for me, you just had to have your Alberta Health Care number ready. And your- your- they asked you to bring proof of your birth, proof that you're a Canadian citizen, proof that- of where you live. And that actually you are who you say you are, which is a normal proof that everybody asked for. Yeah, that wasn't difficult.

**Padraic Cohen** 19:35

Did you have any side effects after your first dose?

**Margaret Geddes** 19:39

No. The arm was a little bit sore the second day and that was about it.

**Padraic Cohen** 19:43

Okay. And you feel pretty good now that you're vaccinated?

**Margaret Geddes** 19:46

About the same, yeah, nothing. I don't notice anything different.

**Padraic Cohen** 19:49

Okay. And after you get the final dosage, the second one, are you going to continue masking in public?

**Margaret Geddes** 19:56

I'm still going to wear the mask. Yeah, I still- apprehensive, I don't know, because there's so many people that don't wear the mask and so many people that don't follow the health guidelines, I think the virus is going to just hang around, it's not going to go anywhere, it's not going to disappear.

**Padraic Cohen 20:13**

Why do you think that that's so prevalent?

**Margaret Geddes 20:17**

I think because a lot of people don't believe in- in trying to stay away from it. They don't believe that it's real. They don't believe that wearing a mask or washing your hands or staying out of large gatherings. They think that's a hoax. And so the virus is- it's able to creep in there and take whoever it wants.

**Padraic Cohen 20:43**

Okay.

**Margaret Geddes 20:44**

And you don't know. It's not like polio; polio finished when the cold weather came. This virus is not doing that; it goes on summer or winter.

**Padraic Cohen 20:56**

So now we can move on to the final part, if you're okay with that. Okay. So after our previous interview, you told me that you'd like to have said more regarding the silver lining one. Would you like to talk about that subject again because I can provide you the question from the previous interview, the same one, if you'd like.

**Margaret Geddes 21:15**

Yeah, I think I've pretty much covered it this time.

**Padraic Cohen 21:17**

Yeah?

**Margaret Geddes 21:17**

I think so I. From what I can remember, it just- I can remember the hot summer days, I can remember the fear from the polio fear. I can remember listening to my mother's saying, "Don't go here, don't go there. Can't go here, can't go there." And then when you saw pictures of the children that were sick, you saw them in the newspaper, then you realize it was serious. Same with now, when they tell you the numbers of the people that are sick, you think, "Oh, that has to be real there. It's a real thing." So you have to respect it. And- and you have to act accordingly.

**Padraic Cohen 21:55**

You're right. So you were just saying that this pandemic's gonna go on for a while?

**Margaret Geddes 22:03**

I believe it will. Yeah, I believe that it- I don't believe that it's going to go that far at all. There's going to have to be a lot of habits that are changed, a lot of them... a lot more vaccinations probably to kill it because it's very viral. It just- it's there. It's very strong. And there's variants of it now that we don't know anything about.

**Padraic Cohen 22:29**

It's all pretty scary.

**Margaret Geddes 22:31**

For me it's scary. Yeah. For some people it isn't, but for me it is, yeah.

**Padraic Cohen 22:38**

So I that's- I guess that's the last question I have there. You- you've answered everything, amazingly. So thank you so much. I really appreciate talking to you, and thank you for your time

**Margaret Geddes** 22:49

I appreciate talking to you.

**Padraic Cohen** 22:50

Thank you, alright, I'm gonna end the recording.