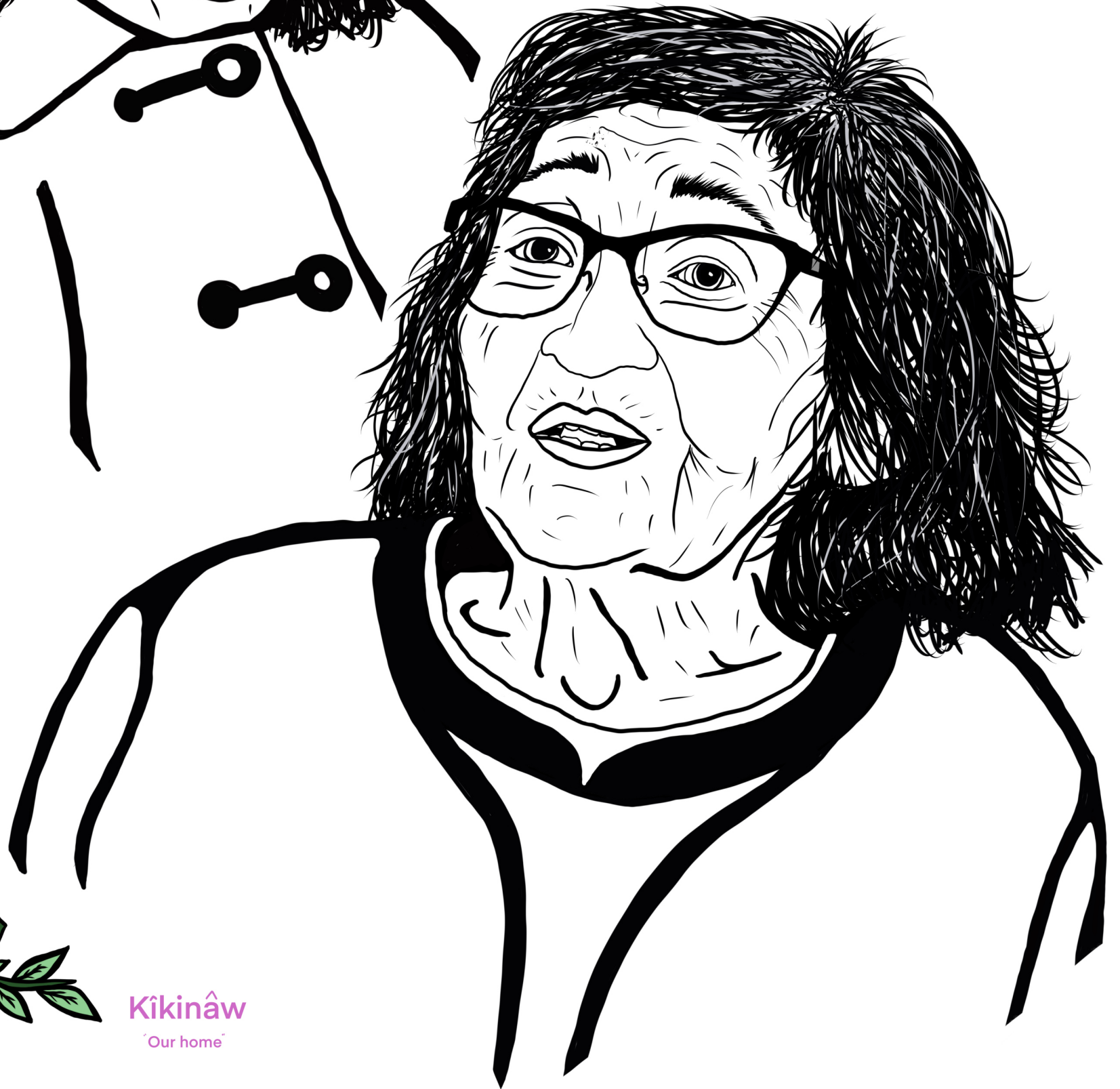




Nellie M. Carlson

July 3, 1927-Sept 10, 2020



Kîkinâw  
"Our home"

Indian Rights

For

Indian women



# Indian Rights for Indian Women

Poster and essay by Francine Cunningham

In 1967, Nellie Carlson (1927–2020), Kathleen Steinbauer, and Jenny Margetts founded a resistance movement called Indian Rights for Indian Women in Edmonton, Alberta. The group's purpose was to gain back the rights of Indigenous women who had lost their Indian Status and whose children, in turn, lost benefits that were theirs to claim under treaty between the government of Canada and Indigenous peoples from across the nation.

In 1876, Section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act defined an Indian as "Any male person of Indian blood reputed to belong to a particular band. Any child of such person. Any woman who is or was lawfully married to such a person." In her book, Nellie describes this clause as essentially saying that Indigenous women were not considered people (58). This type of sexist language and thinking prevented whole generations of people from accessing their homelands and entitled benefits. Women who married non-status Indigenous men had to give up their Indian Status. The Act also took away their children's rights, ensuring that eventually there would be no Indigenous people left in the nation. Indigenous men could also lose their status through military service. So, if a woman were to marry a man with whom she grew up on a reserve and he went to war, they would no longer have Indian status; they would be forced to move off reserve and away from the only place they'd ever called home, and their children would no longer be considered for Indian Status. Meanwhile, the Act allowed non-Indigenous women who married Indigenous men to become "Indians" and receive the benefits denied to Indigenous women. The Indian Act was a vehicle designed to assimilate and erase Indigenous peoples from this land and to take away any remaining rights they had. This is the type of discrimination Indian Rights for Indian Women fought to rebuke.

Nellie was born in 1927 on the Saddle Lake Indian Reserve in Alberta. At the age of five she was sent to the Edmonton Indian Residential School in St. Albert where she spent nine hellish and traumatizing years. She left residential school with a will to act against injustice and that is just what she did everywhere she went. When she learned about the sexism in the Indian Act, she knew she had to do something. When she was informed that if she spoke out against the Act she could be taken off the band list or go to jail, she went and took herself off the band list before the Indian Agent could and told the agent that she would be back to fight for her rights and for all those who couldn't do the same. The years in which these women struggled were hard. They were harassed, followed, and intimidated, but through it all they persevered.

In 1985, Indian Rights for Indian Women finally won their battle with the passage of Bill C-31, an amendment to the Indian Act. The bill restored Indian status to roughly 160,000 people who had lost it. The act was still discriminatory, though. In 2010, it was further amended due to a lawsuit by Sharon McIvor, and many more Indigenous people regained their status. There is still work to be done and further amendments must be made to fully return rights to all who are eligible.

Without strong women like Nellie and the many others who sacrificed time with their families, used their own funds, and risked their lives and livelihoods, up to 500,000 people would still be denied their rights to live on their homelands and access the basic treaty rights for which their ancestors fought.



## Biography

**Francine Cunningham** is an award-winning Indigenous writer, artist, and educator. Francine is a member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation in Alberta but grew up in Calgary, Edmonton, and 100 Mile House, BC. Francine is also Métis and has settler family roots stretching from as far away as Ireland and Belgium. Her debut book of poems, *On/Me*, was nominated for the BC and Yukon Book Prize, an Indigenous Voices Award, and the Vancouver Book Award. Her debut book of short stories, *God Isn't Here Today*, is a book of Indigenous speculative fiction and horror. Her first children's book, *What if bedtime didn't exist*, will be out in 2024 with Annick Press.

## Further Reading

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