Cecile Blanke—Parks Canada Interview, January 30, 2012

Cecile Blanke (CB): On where there was a cave and gave the land numbers. So three years ago we, the church, was really interested in the workers there. There were workers from Lac Pelletier parish, and they went looking for the, for where they figured the land numbers were. There is a cave there, and they don't figure it matches the land numbers.

Darren Prefontaine (DP): Okay.

CB: But I was there about six, oh seven years ago, and I even went inside the cave. And I, my belief is it is the cave.

DP: Okay.

CB: But they didn't think it was because it's higher up on the hill. But it's in a sheltered place, and I could see the winters of nineteen five and six, or was it six and seven, the priest made his home there and preached to the Métis people in the valley.

DP: Okay so where was that?

CB: It's in Lac Pelletier valley.

DP: Lac Pelletier valley.

CB: Yeah. And, I don't have the land numbers but it's stated in two books.

DP: Okay.

CB: The land numbers. We have the Lac Pelletier map, and we looked it up, and we figured that's where it is; that cave. So I don't know anyway we just you know, feel that it had to be a place where most of the Métis lived. And that is where the majority lived, where this cave is.

DP: Okay. I'm going to formally start, just what the date is, and then I'll introduce myself and then you. This is Darren Prefontaine and I'm interviewing Cecile Blanke and her husband Walter Blanke is present. This is for the Grasslands National Park-Parks Canada partnership. And it's January 30th. Hello Cecile, how are you?

CB: I'm fine.

DP: That's good. Could you—

CB: Beautiful day.

DP: Lovely day. Could you please tell me your name and your home community?

CB: Well my name is Cecile Blanke and I live in Swift Current but I was born and raised in Lac Pelletier, in Lac Pelletier valley.

DP: What's your maiden name please?

CB: LaRocque.

DP: LaRocque. Who were your parents and grandparents, and where were they from originally?

CB: Leo, the LaRocques, Leo LaRocque my grandfather he was from Lebret. And my grandmother on my dad's side, these are on dad's side, and she was from the Red River, and I have documents to prove she was there and that's how she got her old age pension, and on my mothers side she's from Willow Bunch, and her parents got married there. And my mother was born there then they came to Lac Pelletier and stayed along the lake for a couple of years, and my mother met my dad, and then my mother stayed there and my grandparents moved onto Alberta. So, the Whitefords.

DP: So your mother was a Whiteford?

CB: That's right.

DP: Did anyone or does anyone in your family speak Michif?

CB: No. My ancestors did, and my grandmother on my dad's side, she didn't speak English at all. She spoke Michif, and my grandfather was fluent in French, English and Michif on the LaRocque side. And on my mother's side they were fluent in English as well as Michif.

DP: Did anyone in your family serve in the military? Like World War One, World War Two or the Korean War?

CB: No.

DP: No. How were the Métis treated in your community? Did your family encounter racism from the larger community? If so, do you have any examples?

CB: We were really discriminated by the church and by the school. When we went to church we had to be in the loft, we'd call it. The loft of the church because downstairs you had to pay for your chair, and we were the poor folks. So all the poor folks who couldn't pay for a chair with your name on the back, we went upstairs. And we felt very humiliated because the downstairs would empty out and stand around outside near the entrance, and they would look at us when we were coming down the stairway. And how we were dressed and how we looked and everything, it was very humiliating because we used to think—and we got there by horse and buggy, and everybody else seemed to have a car. And the other Métis came and they came on saddle horses but they were also upstairs. So the feeling at the time was hard because we thought … I wish I could be like these other people you know, that could have

cars and could sit downstairs. It just seemed like we were a different sort of, a different sort of group of people. And we were shunned you might say. And—

DP: So they were mainly non-Aboriginal people who sat downstairs?

CB: Yes there were all the French culture. Almost a hundred percent.

DP: So there was a lot of discrimination between the local francophone community and the Métis?

CB: Yes they did. And I'll tell you a funny one: they even tied my dad to the chair one time. There was a younger, they were in the choir, the younger French teenagers were older. And my dad had a three piece suit on and the tightener was in the back of the vest, and the chairs were rungs, you know, they were just regular kitchen chairs like you would, used to have with rungs. And they unpinned, undid his tightener and pinned it, and tightened it around the chair rungs. And in church you had to do a lot of kneeling and standing and sitting. So after the sermon we went to stand up and the chair came with him. And the noise and commotion, we were thoroughly embarrassed. And my dad trying to get unhooked and my mother trying to undo him. And it was very, very humiliating. And then dad says the day I get tied in church is the day I don't go back. So my dad was very mad and the priest came, and said I'll rectify those boys or young guys will never do that to you again. So he did at the next time we went.

DP: He made it right?

CB: He, from the pulpit he stood in the pulpit and he pointed to the balcony or the up there and he said if I catch any of you young guys touching Maurice LaRocque you will pay a big penalty. So they never touched us again. That's just one of the experiences that I, you know, that really was a joke sorta thing, but it didn't hit my dad like that. My dad was a cowboy and being tied was being like tied up like a horse.

DP: Yeah okay, sure.

CB: That's what it felt like to him. He was being tied and there was no reason for it so that's why he was very angry.

DP: So they set out to humiliate him?

CB: Yeah, humiliated him. And then school, we went to school and we were, when I started out I was five years old, my sister was six. We started together and we had nuns, and they were, the big room was from grade five to grade twelve. The little room was from grade one to grade four. So we went to the smaller room, but there was probably a hundred kids there, and they, they all called us names, they looked in our lunch kits to see if we had bannock and we just, you know, said to our mother if you didn't make the regular bread we wouldn't go to school. We just couldn't take that to school for the kids to humiliate us. And the teachers didn't … And we had to take French to grade three and we couldn't speak any English at all in the class. And we didn't know French except our Michif language, you know there was part French in there. We would understand that, but we really had a hard time. And so we

just didn't understand so we just, very … what should I say, we didn't appreciate going there. You know, it was a struggle for mother to get us dressed, to get us going, and for us to go there it was not something we, that we were gaining anything on. It was just a … we were humiliated. My brothers, I had two brothers and they would fight. Every recess they were in a fight outside because they were called "Half Breeds" or "Michifs," "dirty Michifs." We were called "dirty Métis" or "dirty Half Breeds." So it was, we never made friends with anybody, or close friends to go to their homes or be invited to their places. It was just like we were a separate bunch and you know it wasn't a good feeling at all. And the teachers, the nuns they were discriminative too like they didn't pay attention to us. So I was in grade, I went there five years, and I was still in grade two. And so was my sister, was in grade three. And my brothers never got passed into grade two. And so that's why it was … And the other Métis kids that were there faced the same thing as we did. And so it was really hard for us to understand because our parents and our grandparents thought we needed an education. Thought we needed to go to school but also we had a truant officer that would come to our home so if we'd miss a couple weeks of school, he would come and he would threaten my parents, and say they're going to a reform school. We're going to take these kids away from you. And they're going to go to a reform school. And to this day, I don't know where this reform school was, and what it was, I don't know. But anyway, that's the, why we, why we were scared. We had to go, we knew that because we knew this guy would come and take us away if we didn't, if we didn't go. So we cooperated, but we were not a happy bunch.

Walter Blanke (WB): Truant office, truant officer.

CB: Well it was … he was a truant officer. And I think he was hired by the municipality to go to each school district and make sure the kids were going to school. So then that was my school days. But our happy times were in the valley where all the Métis people lived. There was some that lived on top of the hills too, and the lake, like the lake had the summer resort and we went there to fish and to play and have fun. And in the summer time, the other kids from further down would come and we'd play, and we'd, we'd just, it was like we were so free and happy, of who we were.

DP: Just the Michif people together.

CB: Michif people together, and we ate the same food. And we'd share our food like when we would go visiting everybody would, we weren't different. We were all, we were all the same and we shared the same things. The other kids went to another school and they experienced the same thing as we did. So when we got together we were so happy because, you know it was fun to be together, play games or whatever.

DP: So you did this for the summer?

CB: And our parents, they lived mostly off the land and would get odd jobs here and there you know, from farmers and getting a little bit of money so that we'd be able to you know, survive. My grandfather was quite a go getter you might say. And between him and my dad they had a lot of horses and they had a lot of cattle. So we always had beef to eat if there wasn't much game. We always had food. And the lake, they went fishing every day, almost every day. Net fishing for white fish. So in the '30s we didn't suffer very much. We had a garden that was about two miles away, and mom was a good gardener, and it was by a

spring. So the garden was irrigated by the spring. And she grew really good gardens so we were never hungry for food because we had, we had food. Not like other settlers that didn't have the same place to live. A lot of us lived against the hill for protection so we didn't need, we weren't out in the open. Like the settlers that came in, they'd build on top of a hill where there was no trees, and I think they, a lot of them did suffer, especially in the '30s. But we didn't because we had shelters. We used to weather in hardships or our parents or grandparents knew where to build and how to survive, survive the prairies and the hardships of weather or sun even.

DP: What other Métis families lived in the vicinity of Lac Pelletier? You mentioned your family, the LaRocques, the Whitfords, but other families?

CB: Well in say, 1900 there was many families. There was, there was the Pritchards, there was the Allarys, there was the Fayants, the Whitefords, the Trottiers and the LaRocques, the Lemeres, the Adams, the Sinclairs, the Guns.

DP: The Guns, okay.

CB: And, Lavallees. So there was, that's the names that I know.

DP: Everyone was kind of inter-related, like cousins?

CB: Yes they were. Would say that's how they got there, and the one thing we were not encouraged to get friendly, like a boyfriend or girlfriend with anybody because we were related. So we had lots of fun with each other but it wasn't a girlfriend boyfriend thing.

DP: People were always watching?

CB: Yeah. So in our fun times, games, dancing or whatever nobody got very serious with each other because that was a no-no.

DP: Do you think that's one reason why a lot of Métis people in the area inter-married other people? Like you, Walter and 'cause the Métis families were related?

CB: That was one reason, but our parents suffered with discrimination so they wanted us to marry a white and our children would be whiter. And a lot of the Métis would hide when they went to Swift Current, like they didn't want to be noticed that much because they just felt, we had a bad name. We were Half Breeds; we were dirty Half Breeds. And that's they way the other cultures looked at us, we were not, we were not there to publically show who we were. They did at rodeos and stampedes because most Métis young guys were cowboys, and they really loved that part of their life. That was the real big, big thing in the valley on a Sunday to round up horses and have a little rodeo. And even some of the girls would learn to ride. And us girls, we all learned to ride and how to handle horses. And so we were horse, horses were a big part of our life and we cherished the horses. They were an important part of our livelihood, and so the, the times that it changed I think was, of course the First World War wasn't around, but the Second World War really changed us. And that's when I remember, what I remember the war very vividly and how it changed the lives of all the people in the valley. And the relatives in different places like Val Marie and Ponteix, even

Maple Creek. I would say the young fellas there was no work after the 30s and then that was an opportunity for them to go do something. You know, go and work for the country or, and, so when they went off to war that took a lot of, a lot out of our people like then the homes then worried about the relatives that were gone to war and then it started—they started to drink. Alcohol became the one thing they figured would help them ease the problem, ease the … And then when soldiers came back on leave they would have money, and they would bring alcohol and they would talk about their experiences. Some even came back from, from the war. And that's the only time they could talk about it is when they were drinking. So by the time the war ended alcohol became a big thing amongst the Métis people. And before that we, occasionally there'd be alcohol but it would be from homemade wine from chokecherries. And we'd do it at dances or to have fun, but when the war broke out, the drinking wasn't fun anymore. It created problems in the families. And then they seemed to, they didn't pay attention to their land. If they owned the land they didn't pay the taxes. So a lot of them lost their land. And then they had to move away because the … And even the road allowances were taken up by the farmers. So they didn't allow you to live on the road allowances.

DP: So they were moving Métis people off road allowances?

CB: Yes. They left and they went to the city, like Swift Current. A lot of them moved to the city. That was left in the valley.

DP: Do you think the turning point in the traditional Michif way of life and culture would have been World War Two?

CB: Yes.

DP: That's when everything changed?

CB: Yes. That's when it really changed. And that's when people weren't happy about their culture anymore because there was so many things missing then. Like our fun times weren't fun anymore. And peoples' gatherings weren't the same anymore. So that's how uh, people drifted away and the old people died early after they left there because they couldn't cope with city life or they couldn't live the way they had lived all their life. And so they were, they were oppressed. They were very oppressed. And some of them drank too much, some of them just got sick and died, but nobody, hardly anybody lived to an old age. Real old. You know or to say, eighty-years-old. I would say there was, they all died before they were eighty.

DP: Do you know any traditional Métis stories or songs? Like were they told a lot in your family and community?

CB: The stor—

DP: The old Michif stories, the old Michf songs.

CB: The story that I remember the best is Wiisakaychak stories.

DP: Okay.

CB: And we didn't have a lot of story books so at night we would say, we want a story, we want a bedtime story. So out would come the Wiisakaychak stories. But, the only one I really remember, and I've told it many times, and wherever I've told it nobody else has heard it.

DP: Okay, no worries.

CB: A story about the valley. Wiisakaychak was in the valley, and he said "If I can wear out these stones that are around the lake and on the hills there won't be no stones." And our imagination when we went to the lake there was always stones except in the south end of the lake. We thought if there were no stones it would be so nice. This lake would be so much better to swim in. And then of course, the stones, if you went with a buggy or wherever you went there was stones to be going around or they seemed like they were always in the road, and of course for in the garden or for farming. So we just inherited it. Wiisakaychak is gonna get rid of these stones so he slid up and down the hills. Up and down, and he wore out his skin going up and down the hills. He wore it out on his hands, his knees and his behind, his heels, his feet until it was just dripping blood. And he still, he said "I gotta give up 'cause I can't wear it out." So when he was done as he was walking through the valley his drops of blood from his flesh would be on the ground, whatever. And wherever the, the red willow grew.

DP: Okay.

CB: And the red willow is known for the kinnikinnick they smoked in their pipes. So when we heard that we thought, "isn't that nice, you know that something come about from his hard work?" So whenever we'd see a red willow growing we'd say, "hmm there's Wiisakaychak, his blood, he made this." But the other part, the other part I don't tell the kids is the ending to his story. After he'd lost, he got well again, he had scabs all over and he'd lost his scabs, and he went back on the same trails, he went back on the same trail. Kokom lost her pemmican so he picked it up and ate it. So he ate his own scabs.

DP: Ate his scabs?

CB: That's the other part of the story. Oh my goodness, Wiisakaychak ate his own scabs.

DP: I've heard that story many times.

CB: Have you?

DP: That's the first time I've heard it related to south-western Saskatchewan. Good story, thank you.

CB: You're welcome.

DP: You mentioned earlier that your family had cattle and your mother grew a good garden and they fished. What sorts of other resources did your family harvest? Like did you guys pick berries and seneca?

CB: Oh big time, yeah

DP: So you were busy all year collecting things?

CB: Yeah. And trapping and fishing in the lake in the winter like with nets. And there's a lot of gooseberries around the lake, but which there's none anymore. And cactus berries which you don't see in a lot of places. We picked cactus berries, but we ate them, there was never enough to make jam, but we ate them. And flowers. Flowers really, like the wild roses meant a lot to us. We could eat them, but also we picked them for my aunt. She made potpourri.

DP: Okay.

CB: And she made little cotton sacks, and she would dry it, and put it in the sack, and then put it where your towels are or your lingerie or, and it smelled so nice. And then rose hips, we had to wait 'til there was a frost and then we'd pick the rose hips and eat the outer skin or them. Or, you could make jelly out of them. And that was just, we couldn't wait until there was a frost so that we could eat these rose hips.

DP: What's—this is kind of related now—what sort of traditional medicines were used in your community and family? Who were the medicine people in your family and community?

CB: My grandmother was our medicine person. And anyway, she made this, if we weren't feeling well she made us drink this tea, but I never knew what kind of leaves that she used. And to respect the elders, the older part, grown-up people you were not to ask questions. This was our way of how we had to behave. So we never asked grandma what she used in that tea. But that tea was a laxative. So we'd drink it, and then the next morning we were off to … And then we'd feel good so that's the way they'd, that's what she did. And then, she had … she picked seneca roots but there was only a few places where they would find them. And then the coneflower. We had to pick coneflowers for her. And she'd use the yellow petals and use them for some kind of herbal medicine. And there was other things to that … And gathering they used, what do you call it, the roots of cattails.

DP: Okay.

CB: They would pick them when they were young and dry them. And the root part of it, they dried, and it was like powder. And they would powder it, make it into powder, and that was thickening for your gravy and your soups.

DP: Was your grandma also a midwife? Did she deliver the babies?

CB: Yes she did yeah. She didn't deliver none of us but she did deliver in the valley yeah.

DP: By your time, the hospital was where the babies were being born?

CB: No, I was born by a midwife but a different person. And midwiving I would say stopped in the '50s because hospitals cost you money and doctors, and that's why there was, people did their own medicines and own delivering because they didn't have the money to go to the hospital or to be delivered or whatever. I remember one of our friends down in the

valley they were chopping wood and her sister chopped her finger off. And she ran in the house and took the finger and the mother right away bandaged it up. It worked; she never lost the finger.

DP: So she just applied traditional medicines to it?

CB: Yeah, we were shocked by this horrible procedure but, or no, it could be mended without a doctor. And it grew back together. I think it was stiff but…

DP: Well, I think if as a species we've managed to live a million and a half years before doctors came so.

CB: They did. They knew how to do different things. Yes, yes.

DP: You mentioned the road allowances earlier. Did anyone in your family live in a road allowance? Or did you always own property?

CB: No, we always had property. But the people down in the valley, there was several families that lived on the road allowance.

DP: So the PFRA came in, they were all moved off the land?

CB: No the fences were changed and the farmers took over the road allowances.

DP: So the—

CB: They weren't really a road, they're called road allowances, but it's just a line of property. And that's where they were allowed. There's so many feet that they could sit, but eventually the land owners came in and fenced it so you couldn't live there. Because they would make a gate or whatever, it was too inconvenient, and they didn't really want you there either.

DP: So that was probably the '40s and '50s.

CB: Yeah.

DP: Did anyone in your family make beaded or embroidered moccasins or other items? Like…

CB: My mother was a beautiful beader. She made a buckskin coat. There was another lady that tanned the hides. Deer hides, and that, because we didn't have moose so it was deer and antelope hides that they tanned. And this one fella had gotten enough deer to make a coat so my mother made the coat and she beaded it. And it was just beautiful. Like it was beaded on the back and on the front shoulders and on the pockets and on the cuffs, and it had lots of fringes I remember just like yesterday how beautiful it was. But he wore it once to Swift Current, and it was in the '40s and we were not to hunt, fish or trap. No fish … we could, but we were not to trap or hunt. And the cops were after him. They said "who, where did you get this jacket? Where does it come from?" And I don't know what he said but he never wore it again to town.

DP: So the game wardens were quite hard on the Métis?

CB: Oh very hard on us. Very, very hard on us.

WB: He got three months for shooting two ducks. I shouldn't interfere. Three months for shooting two ducks. And was robbed of his ring.

CB: This family were very hard up, and they had a little slough in the back of their property. It was probably a dam that they had made so that they'd have water there for their horses, and there was a couple of, there was some ducks that came in the spring so he killed the males because they were always worried about reproduction. So he killed two ducks, and they were eating them on the table, they cooked them. And the police arrived. And she took them and threw them in the fire box, an old wood stove, she threw them in the fire box, and they were starting to burn up. When the cops walked in and he pulled them out of there, put them in his bag. So he went three months of jail for that. We were terrified of the Mounties.

DP: So the relationship wasn't all that good?

CB: No it wasn't. When we seen them coming we knew there was something they were after. And this one time they came and my dad had some muskrats that he'd, that he'd caught, and he had them in a little cedar box. And proceeded to seed the field, and it was off quite a ways from the yard and they came in our house and our furniture was mostly cardboard boxes for mom did a lot of sewing. So they took every box and threw it on the floor and they turned all the beds upside down. Every drawer they dumped out on the floor. Everything that we had. It was just like a whole disaster when they left. And they were just probing. They went into the … my grandpa had some wheat in a bin because we did have a bit of farm land. And they went in there with great big sticks poking to see if there'd be any furs in there. They went to the barn and looked in the mangers. They went in both the houses, our grandparents' house and they turned everything upside down. And my dad was just shaking all this time because he knew he had those furs. And he was standing in the middle of the yard. I can still see them standing there and one cop said "Oh we didn't go over there, where that machinery is, maybe there's something over there?" And the other cop said, "No, I don't think so." And the relief that was on my dad's face was just unbelievable because he would have went to jail for sure.

DP: So people really lived in fear of the police then?

CB: Oh they were just scared, and the funny part is one woman way down in the valley, she was making homemade wine out of chokecherries, and it was in a cellar down in the basement. Well they only had dirt basements. And he opened the lid and there was this big 45 gallon brew of homemade chokecherry wine. And he said, "What's this?" he asked her. And she said, "Oh this is vinegar." Because people made vinegar in those years. So she had big strong guys, and they no more than drove out of the yard, and she got those boys and she said, "Get this wine outta here, they're gonna charge us, we're gonna go to jail." They hauled this whole thing, took it over the hill and dumped it. So the police went to the neighbours or our neighbours, and he said, "Boy you guys are gonna have a good party. He

said there's a big batch of wine going on." Oh so then later we find she dumped the whole thing out. So that's why, we were just really, really scared.

DP: So you, think the Métis were scared no doubt?

CB: Yes. And when they came out and who put the word, or the word out they should come and dig in our places but they did in every home. Not, just ours.

DP: So Métis in general.

CB: We were not allowed to have any kind of furs. Muskrat, mink or deer hides or—

DP: And if your dad bought a licence?

CB: There was no licence. After the '30s the depletion of deer and game were very scarce.

DP: In the southwest?

CB: So everybody was disallowed.

DP: So they wanted to rebuild the animals.

CB: Yeah. That's what the purpose was but that was our livelihood. And we weren't scavengers or whatever you might say. We only killed what we needed. And they always killed the male so the female could reproduce. Like the ducks or … So they didn't want it depleted. We wanted to build it up because they knew.

DP: No one was shooting female deer in the wintertime because she was going to have babies.

CB: Yeah. Yeah.. They never done that, no.

DP: Swift …sorry. Switch gears now a bit, holidays and that sort of thing. How did your family celebrate holidays and special occasions such as Christmas, Easter or New Years?

CB: Well I'll tell ya a funny story before, Christmas. We believed in Santa Claus just like anybody else, and of course we were all Catholics so they went to midnight mass, mom and dad. And we weren't allowed to go … And the story goes with my mother, she said the devil is tied outside the church. And if any kid goes that devil is gonna get away and he's gonna eat you up. So when I was small I would imagine this, like a big black wolf and eyes shining and being tied there and as soon as he'd, we could just imagine him coming at you. And we'd say "Oh, no, we don't want to go." We were glad to stay home.

DP: So the old people when they talked about the devil he was a big black dog?

CB: Yeah. Yeah.

DP: Did they say "li Jiyaab" [the Devil]?

CB: Li Jiyaab.

DP: Rougaroo.

CB: So then we'd be glad to go to bed and when mom and dad got home from midnight mass our stockings were hung and Santa Claus would had come. So we would get up when they came. And we'd be happy to see our gifts which wasn't much because they didn't have much. But this one time my uncle, he was single, and he was assigned to babysit. So anyway we had an attic that was above mom and dad's bed, and he got into my grandma's homemade wine so he was lit, pretty lit. We all went to bed, and he was supposed to get the gifts out, and get them ready for us but he gets up in this bed, and he goes in the attic and don't ya think he was so drunk he fell outta there. And he fell down on the bed with all the gifts and everything. And we thought this is Santa Claus? Oh we could have cried because our happiness about Santa was always so exciting and then we found out, but our younger brother, he didn't hear the commotion. So we—

DP: Kept it a secret.

CB —kept it from him for a couple of years.

DP: Okay.

CB: So anyway that's how we found … and we had a good meal that day, but we stayed home on Christmas day. We probably went over to grandpa and grandma's house but …

DP: New Year's was the big holiday?

CB: New Year's. New Year's was the big thing. And in my, in our tradition, I didn't hear it anywhere else but the, my grandfather was in the bedroom with a light, a dim light and the oldest to the youngest would follow in a row before we ate or greeted one another.

DP: He'd bless you all.

CB: And you knelt in front of him, and he'd put his right hand on your head and he'd pray for you for the whole year that everything would be good for you.

DP: Bénédiction.

CB: It was…That's what you called it?

DP: It was a benediction, yeah. Le bénédiction or something.

CB: Oh, Okay.

DP: Like when the father or grandfather blessed all the children and prayed to them or for them yeah.

CB: Well that's what he did for us. He just, I still can feel it you know. I think—

DP: A lot of love there.

CB: That he wanted to protect us. And then afterwards came the kissing and you had to kiss in a row. The oldest to the youngest. And then the feast. Grandma would come over and my aunt wasn't married either and they would have all this good food. And it wasn't porridge. It was—

DP: The best meal of the year.

CB: Yeah.

DP: So you would have like boulettes.

CB: Bannock and boulettes and chokecherries and pouchine

DP: Pies.

CB: Pouchine [au sac] was—

DP: Blood pudding.

CB: Steamed pudding.

DP: Okay.

CB: Fruit. Steamed fruit pudding.

DP: Steamed fruit pudding okay.

CB: And they had pies. My aunt knew how to make pies. And potatoes they had, you know they would have, we would always have potatoes and turnips and carrots. So that was on the table too so it was a full meal.

DP: And then dancing?

CB: And then the others would start coming but then the other neighbours would come. And then my dad would go to the barn and get, hitch up his team of horses and we were dressed in new dresses. Mom always made us new dresses, and we were bathed the night before and had everything just sparkling. And then we'd get our winter clothes on, and get in the sleigh and go to the next neighbour. And the same thing was there, kiss everybody and then feast. And the last place was at my great uncles place and the dance. That's where the dance was at. And they danced all day, all night. Like it would be in the afternoon when you start dancing. They hauled the furniture outside to make room and the coats and blankets were laying along the edges of the room wherever there was room. And when we were tired, we'd lay down and cover up, and we'd wake up, and we'd watch them dance, and there'd be how many fiddlers and accordion, and they had homemade wine. And they would go on all

night. And the jigging and fiddling. It was just music to your ears. It was just … and everybody forgave one another.

DP: All grievances…

CB: It was a New Year. You started over again. So, whatever was bothering you during the year, that was the time for forgiveness and start a new year.

DP: So the old Michif holidays, you'd say that was the most important?

CB: Yeah the most important one.

DP: So where's Christmas and Easter were more religious, this was more community?

CB: Yes we had to go to church on Easter too. And go to confession and communion.

DP: And you had a long period of Lent for Easter?

CB: Oh yes. We had to observe Lent. There was no dancing, there was no drinking, and no meat eating Wednesday as well as Friday, but we had the lake, we had fish. So we always had lots of fish. Yep.

DP: I think just an aside—in the old days, Middle Ages they got around it by saying like mammals that lived in the water, like beavers and otters, they didn't know the difference between mammals and fish, so they said those are fish and eat them. So there are ways. I bet you some people probably thought that too, it lives in the water, it's probably a fish even though it's not. But anyway … Was anyone in your family involved in the Métis society? Like your mother or father or any aunts?

CB: No. I had a, my great-uncle. J.-Z. LaRocque from Lebret, he was the first president, my great uncle.

DP: And he was the police officer?

CB: Yeah.

DP: Historian too.

CB: Yeah

DP: And then of course, you were involved with the Métis society later.

CB: In '70s. I was, five years from '72 to '78 I was president in Swift Current.

DP: Okay. We talk a lot about Lac Pelletier, Lac Pelletier. Are there any other culturally or historically significant places that are important to you as a Métis person in south-western Saskatchewan?

CB: I would say Willow Bunch for sure because I've been there lots, and my mother was born there. And my grandparents were married there. So I find Willow Bunch a very unique place, and I think in the early days, like how important Lac Pelletier was to us. The coulees and the springs, and the game. I think of Willow Bunch the same way, [it] had a lot of trees, I guess at one time. For survival, it was a really neat place.

DP: Oasis really.

CB: Yeah, yeah.

DP: I'm from actually a town half hour away, so I know it quite well.

CB: And also Val Marie. I think Val Marie was beside the river, and my grandma's brother was the Trottier that went there and started to be there. They went with the priest and then the priest named Val Marie, and they were quite involved with the start up, before, well the ranchers were just starting to come in and settlers. But the Trottiers were a big part of Val Marie and also Notre Dame. That, my dad and my great-grandparents they bought a house, they lived in there.

DP: At Ponteix?

CB: In Ponteix?

DP: Now Trottiers, your grandmother was a Trottier?

CB: Mmhmm.

DP: Okay. And she was Patrice's daughter?

CB: Patrice's sister.

DP: Patrice's sister, okay. Was your family involved in the 1885 resistance?

CB: No, not really, really directly linked that I know J.-Z. talked about my great-grandpa, he was with Star Blanket and they said, this is what I heard later, is that Star Blanket and his Indian tribe were gonna go help the Métis with this battle but J.-Z. said that just when they were decided to go there was an eclipse. And Star Blanket's group said—

DP: Bad omen.

CB: Yeah. So that's why they didn't go. But they would have been slaughtered, they would have been a lot more dead or a lot more killed then 'cause the army had so many more than what the Indian tribe could have brought there.

DP: Well—

CB: So maybe that was an omen and a thing they believed. They shouldn't go.

DP: Well the aftermath was horrible for all Aboriginal people.

CB: Yeah, yeah.

DP: Just a few more questions. We talked about the Mounted Police, so I'm assuming that your ancestors never worked for them or scouted for them or anything …

CB: Well that J.-Z. worked for a while.

DP: J.-Z. was.

CB: For a while he did yeah. But none of our …

DP: Where did your ancestors take Métis scrip?

CB: I can't answer that because I know where they took homesteads. Like Whitefords took homestead at Willow Bunch and my grandpa LaRocque took homestead at Saskatchewan Landing. So—

DP: So they could have gotten their scrip in Manitoba maybe.

CB: Yeah. Maybe while they were somewhere else. And they took scrip before they ever came.

DP: To Saskatchewan. These questions, there's just a few more relating to Parks Canada. How can Parks Canada make Grasslands, and I guess you're involved with Fort Walsh to a lesser extent too, more Métis friendly? Do you have any ideas or do you think they are going in the right direction?

CB: I'm really happy with Grasslands Park that they're, they got the natural land that hasn't been you know … been turned over from farming or whatever. Maybe some of it is I'm not sure. But anyway, I'm so happy with the natural part of it. I think today we need to preserve you know, the good parts of our country, and I feel the Grassland Park has gone the right direction like to put the buffalo there and then the ferrets. I'm interested in the ferrets.

DP: The prairie dogs.

CB: Yeah and the prairie dogs.

DP: And the prairie, the natural grass prairie.

CB: Yeah. And my dad, he used to talk about when he went to Val Marie about the rattle snakes you know. And the kit foxes too, my dad used to talk about. He said they'd sleep out in the prairie and the kit fox would steal something, but he'd bring you something back. So you always had to secure your stuff he said. So that's what I'm glad of and, and Fort Walsh also. Because the Métis were around all these areas so much with hunting, they knew, you know they knew the hills. They knew where the water was. And, I think they, they were really smart survivors because they knew how to survive. Chasing buffalo.

DP: So you think the hiring of, say Kathy [Grant] as a Métis liaison, Métis community was a good move on their part?

CB: Yes I do. She's said she's gonna be working on Fort Benton is it? And the trail to Fort Welsh, and I think that's really good because when people come to visit there I think it's good that they know the Métis were part of, big part of the land in the early days besides the First Nations. So that teaches the people about our culture too.

DP: Well it's one of those funny things because they're founding people of the region, there before non-Aboriginal people, but there really wasn't a lot there to indicate presence. So more recognition.

CB: Yeah because they were the ones that left the Red River cart tracks, but everything else, they never polluted or left stuff laying behind. They always cleaned up. Even the homes that were in the Lac Pelletier valley, you can't find any trace of where they lived. You might find a hole, an indentation from where they lived.

DP: And I was trying to explain to someone one time why we had the Métis guides and scouts that have been so important down there because I said you know most of the water you can't drink. It's like full of alkali and that. The Métis would have known exactly where the good water and that was.

CB: They did.

DP: 'Cause you imagine a horse drinking a belly full of alkali water, what that would have done. Because I'm telling ya, people don't believe me but down south water is bad.

CB: Yeah, yes.

DP: There's very, there's some nice natural springs, but there's parts where it's all full of alkali and that.

CB: Alkali. Yeah I guess.

DP: And you can't drink that water.

CB: Well the horses woulda got sick. They would have diarrhoea so bad, got weak and died on the trails.

DP: Well so, who'd know that. Little things like that you don't think of, but that's really important. One last question. This relates to Parks Canada, specifically Grasslands. They're producing a cultural resources value statement and they want to identify potential cultural values that are important to the history of the park. As a Métis person they want to know whether or not you'd like to see these areas followed up on or added to. And the topics of interest that they've identified are trading post, relationship with bison, ranching, farming, Great Depression, governance and administration, creation of the national park,

paleontological and geological features, early exploration and surveys and historic use of the area. As a Métis person, are those all important to you?

CB: Yes they are.

DP: So if, you would like to see them fully explore every avenue possible related to Métis history and culture?

CB: If they can find, any part of those things that's, and continue the ongoing thing. And the parks, the park is really teaching about our southern area of Saskatchewan which is no where else in the world. Or nowhere else in Canada. And I feel that's a very important thing for our Métis perspective because that is natural land. And natural land was very important, the natural lands, the natural habitats, the natural grasses, all the natural things to keep the human being healthy.

DP: So restoring a little part of it so it looks like the land your grandparents lived on means a lot to you?

CB: Sure did. Yes.

DP: Do you have any other things you want to talk about or have we covered them all Cecile?

CB: I think—

DP: We've talked.

CB: We've talked a lot about and, I'm one that I keep teaching every year. I teach grades five and six in the schools in Swift Current. They come out to the lake for two days. And I get them on the night after they've been there a while because they're pretty excited, and they all sit around me. Last spring, I had 42 kids or 45, and they sit all in front of me, and I stand in front with my sash, and I tell them the stories of what I've told you, some of them. But I tell them the stories that would be interesting to them not as an adult. And so, I never see a kid move, their eyes are all looking at me. And that's such a good feeling.

DP: And that means a lot.

CB: Because I know I'm getting across what I want to tell them. And that is my one happy time.

DP: Talking to little kids.

CB: And I think it's gonna help them understand who we are, where they're going. Which their parents, grandparents, don't even know a lot about us.

DP: But that's how you win in the end. That's how you defeat racism because I do think it's little kids that will end all these ugly things. For sure.

CB: I had one group … it was grade 8s in another school … when I got done I told them some bitter stories. More than I do to the little ones. They were all crying when I was done. And not that I want to do that to them but they could feel from what I told them the hardships we had and how we want people to understand who we are. And you know, that we're just as equal to anybody and they could feel that, you know, looking at me I'm just as normal as anybody else.

DP: Their grandma.

CB: Yeah. So that's why I've had some experiences where …

DP: So the most rewarding work you'd say is your work with the school kids?

CB: Yep. I've worked with them, with the teachers. They take two years, their first two years in Swift Current. And I've done it about four times. Go to them and tell them what it feels like to be Métis or Aboriginal. And I say the population in Saskatchewan is getting, is great. The number of young people are there. And I say you're probably going to be teaching wherever you teach and this is some of the stuff I, and I have a couple of them meet me afterwards, and they said for what you told that day and taught us we could never read in a text book. And they were so grateful I was there and did that so.

DP: Face-to-face. I have an MA in history. I went to the university for 6 years, I read a lot of Canadian history, world history, Native studies, you name it. But I've learned just as much talking to people like you. Things I would have never know before. I didn't know there was a Michif language until I came to work at GDI. And I have 6 years of university in Canadian history so what does that say?

CB: Well my experience with Michif, it was here in nine, I don't know what year. 2002, they had one here and I came. And told us what Michif was all about. And, I knew our language, but I never knew that much about it, and we had the whole weekend and I went home crying because when I went to school and we'd come home, my kokom would be speaking Michif. She didn't speak English. And I used to think grandma, I took French in school and you're all mixed up. "Why don't you talk Cree or why don't you talk French?" That's what I used to think about her. So when I learned about this—

DP: Unique language.

CB: And then I went home and I thought grandma, "I was all wrong, you were the one that knew the language from the Red River and carried it all those years". And here I thought she was pretty mixed up. And that was embarrassing for me to think, well I cried, I thought grandma if only I could have told you that "I'm so proud of you that she could speak that language fluently." So anyway that's about it. That's how I found out about Michif so it hasn't even been ten years.

DP: You knew of the language but you just didn't know what it was called?

CB: No I didn't know it was an official language in Canada either no. And that it was made up of nouns and verbs and then some other little bits mixed in there. I was so glad. I just

thought this is the best thing I've heard, that we had our own language and it was a language that—

DP: People around the world are interested in studying.

CB: It's the only language in the world that has the two together.

DP: Structured that way.

CB: Mhmm. So I heard that and I thought I have nothing to be, you know to, I'm so happy about it I think but I can understand but I can't say too much. What were you going to say Walter?

DP: Yes Walter, do you want me to …

WB: What I was going to say was that when we were in Drumheller those people from up north there by Peace River country they celebrated their Christmas the same way. And, those Pritchards at Battleford they celebrated Christmas and New Years the same. So that was about all I have to—

DP: So that was a common Métis holiday throughout Western Canada.

CB: When I talked to my cousins in Battleford, they are my second and third cousins and they said "we're like sisters because you grew up the same way as we did, our food, our celebrations and how we conducted ourselves on a daily basis was, we're the same. We're all the same." So that was so unique to know. Well here we were you know, two, three hundred miles apart, and yet we did the same thing.

DP: And I talk to Métis, Michif people throughout Western Canada and that's all the same. Maybe not so much in the north but on the plains, the prairies it was all the same.

CB: All the same.

DP: Like I knew exactly what you were talking about like the benediction with the grandpa or the father blessing the children and grandchildren, I knew exactly.

CB: Knew exactly.

DP: Kissing day. That's another name for New Years but that's common throughout Western Canada. But it's nice to know there's that commonality amongst all the difference too.

CB: Yep for sure.

DP: Well I thank you both ever so much and I'll conclude the interview. Thank you Cecile, thank you Walter.

CB: Thank you for meeting here and—

DP: Yes, thank you.

CB: And to get, this is more like a teaching again like you'll get it out there in a different way or the Grassland parks will and that's a way of promoting our culture and teaching.

DP: And getting that connection for southwest Saskatchewan …

CB: Yep, yep.

DP: Which means a lot to me since I'm from there. Thank you both.