

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT:                  ETHEL B. ISBISTER  
INFORMANT'S ADDRESS:                      335 RIVER STREET WEST  
  PRINCE ALBERT, SASKATCHEWAN  
INTERVIEW LOCATION:                      335 RIVER STREET WEST  
  PRINCE ALBERT, SASKATCHEWAN  
TRIBE/NATION:                              METIS  
LANGUAGE:                                  ENGLISH  
DATE OF INTERVIEW:                       03/30/84  
INTERVIEWER:                              ALMA ROY  
INTERPRETER:  
TRANSCRIBER:                              HEATHER YAWORSKI  
SOURCE:                                   SASKATOON NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOC.  
  & BATOCHÉ CENTENARY CORP.  
TAPE NUMBER:                              #IH-SD.27  
DISK:                                      TRANSCRIPT DISC #153  
PAGES:                                    10  
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Alma:      Ethel Isbister from Prince Albert. I'm sure we've  
discussed this again. I want to go over it again, Ethel. Can  
you describe to me the house that you lived in that you  
remember? Your earliest memories of growing up, what is it?

Ethel:      I mean about the home life?

Alma:      Yeah, your home, your community, your family life.  
What stands out most in your memories?

Ethel:      My memory is the greatest thing is that (sound effect  
-- not explained). That's my greatest, because when love is

not... perfect love is not in the home, now I see, at that time I didn't. I thought everybody was the same, you know, being a child, eh. I talk to you (inaudible) thought just everybody was the same, but no, I begin to find out they are different. When I begin to work out at other homes, kids were different. And, you know, they were just different, that's all. And, but you see, what made the difference is that mother at home. She was a mother, she was a born mother. You know some women are not born mothers, did you know that? They are females but they are not mothers. They'll mother a dog, you notice that, but they won't have time for kids. Yeah, that's what happening today. If they're not mothering a dog, they'll mother a cat. You see, God gave us that to be a mother, eh, but then they've lost (inaudible) and love for the kids, then it's time to mother something else, you see. So that's perverted, you see -- it's wrong. And... but my home life when I was a child, you know, it was, we were satisfied and yet a lot of times we had nothing to eat.

Alma: You had strong family ties?

Ethel: Yes. Yes.

Alma: Was it a large family?

Ethel: Oh yeah, my uncles, there was quite a few of them there, yeah. And I had two aunts, and my aunt, she was just like my sister, you know, she was just like my sister. You see my uncles are like my brothers to me.

Alma: Were there any fiddlers in your...?

Ethel: No.

Alma: In your...?

Ethel: Oh yeah, Alec the violin, he played the violin. And he was, you've heard of, or you've heard of Don Messer, eh? He was a violinist like that. He was short, too, like that. So we had an orchestra at home always an orchestra, you know. They played the banjos, and guitars, and drums, and piano; but we didn't have a piano at home but being them musical, they were musical, it was nothing for them to pick music at a piano, eh, in some other house, and they played it in the hall.

Alma: What kind of dances were danced then?

Ethel: All kinds of dances. In half-breed dances like we had house dances too, you know. When the people begin to settle around and then we'd, but they come from quite a ways to dance, eh. We danced like Red River jig, drops of brandy, and double jig, you know, and quadrilles, a lot of quadrilles, and different, kind of different, little bit different ways. And all the other dances are (?).

Alma: When the people started coming in and forming sort of community...

Ethel: Yeah.

Alma: What sort of events did all the communities get together for, like what was...?

Ethel: Mostly a dance.

Alma: A wedding?

Ethel: No we didn't go, we didn't fuss for a wedding, people just went and got married and that was it.

Alma: There was no big celebration?

Ethel: No. No, but you know what, they stayed married. That's the difference, you see. Here today it's an outward show. They'll have bridesmaids, and a big show, big wedding of bridal gowns, and maybe a year's time already they're separated. I mean, it's just a big show, and it costs a lot of money for nothing.

Alma: What about at Christmas?

Ethel: Well, we tried to have a little, a meal, you know, and something a little special, eh, at Christmas time. And same with New Year's. But as far as having toys and stuff like that, we never had. Maybe a little candy and oranges. It was a lot if we have oranges, eh. We were so happy to have an orange, you know. I remember that really good.

Alma: You were telling me that your family had a garden and...

Ethel: Yes.

Alma: And all livestock. Well, you really didn't have that much money to buy anything.

Ethel: No, no we didn't.

Alma: Just staples. Even though you didn't have all the things, do you still say you still had a very happy...

Ethel: I'd rather live then, yes. I'd rather live that way as a child than to live this modern way today.

Alma: You mean get up at five o'clock in the morning and work all day and for \$4 a month?

Ethel: Yeah, I was happy. I was happy. You see money is nothing, money is nothing. Some people think money is the thing. My needs were supplied. See now my son, you know what my son now says, "I wouldn't work, I wouldn't work for \$4." Well I guess not -- not today. Their wages they get, see this is it now, you know, Margaret and (?) people, like nowadays the wages are so high, and yet there's something missing. You see,

there's something missing. I was satisfied. In fact I ate and I helped people, I was satisfied. The main thing, I wasn't bumming around. This is one thing my make-up was, I didn't believe in no bumming around. I'll earn my board if I have to, you know. I didn't like this other way, you know. So before I'd bum, I'd work with my hands and live honestly, eh, live honest. But this, I never liked this other way and today they want, people want so much money and that money, it cannot buy love. That money cannot buy love, I don't care how much you have. You can't pray yourself to heaven. There's no use paying anybody to pray you to heaven -- it's free. God made it free when He died on the cross. When Jesus died on the cross He set us free and He paid it with His blood, so heaven is free. And then that's where... but yet, see my granny, it's my granny that does it different, that the mother was the one that made the difference. That's why I say it's so important for mothers today to bring up their little children. I have a grandson, you know, so I used to tell him about Jesus and I would take him on my knees and I'd tell him the story about the (?) and when He first come. And today that little boy he says to me, "Tell me from the beginning, Grandma." Now "Grandma", now I'm a grandma. But I knew what it took to bring up a kid. That little boy doesn't swear. He's nine years old now and he's in the honour role.

Alma: Your grandma must have been a very strong influence on you. Did she teach you any of the traditional skills, like beading or...?

Ethel: No.

Alma: Any native handiwork?

Ethel: No. No, she wasn't, my grandma was really fair. She was a fair woman and she was not much like Indian ways, you know, like crafts, that stuff. She sewed, yeah, she sewed. But one thing about my grandma, the sewing machine was there, eh. If our little girls, the little girls, wanted to go ahead to open up that sewing machine she didn't stop it. Then we learned to sew. See, some parents say, "Don't! Don't! You'll break my sewing machine, break the needle!" you know. Not Grandma. She just let us go to it. And any time we felt like just cleaning house, walls, and everything she (?). She was glad. We just went ahead with it, just like we were always free, we weren't in bondage, like.

Alma: You must have been good kids.

Ethel: Well, I think it's because of Grandma. Yeah, must have been.

Alma: Stong female...

Ethel: Yeah. A real backbone in the home. That's what a mother is, you see. You can, today you can have a fancy home, you know, beautiful home, carpets, and all this, you know. If the mother's not there, it's just an empty house.

(LONG PAUSE IN TAPE)

Ethel: ...and make mattresses and the straw was clean, eh. And we'd empty them out and go and get another clean bunch, wash the tick, eh, and then fill it up again, so that was really clean. And when we got a little bit better off then we got some lime and lime washed the walls, and they were white and glistened. And we washed clothes by hand. And Grandma used to make lye soap. She used to take some grease and make lye soap and that was our soap. And for a smell, like, I've used, lately I've cut some spruce boughs and make my pine sol, make my pine sol and it made a nice smell. And I remember my dad when he trapped, he'd boil his traps in this solution and boil them in the spruce boughs, you know, spruce boughs to kill the smell, you know, so the rats won't smell say, weasel smell and be scared of the traps, eh. That's what they used to do; they used to boil all, disinfect all their traps, boil their traps.

Alma: What did your father do for a living?

Ethel: He, he was a hunter; he hunted and trapped. And then he farmed, and he was a carpenter so he was busy. He had a big family.

Alma: All of your, all of the members of your family, did they all have special responsibilities in the home?

Ethel: No, not really, but, but just what, whatever we were told we just went and done. Like, when I was telling you about the wood, the wood, you know, we used to have to cut wood and we didn't have no fancy saws. We used to use what they call a cross-cut saw and that was about five feet long. They were long and for little kids that was even hard to lift; but, you know, that's what we cut our wood with, us little kids. So we used to get out, it didn't matter how cold it was, and we didn't have parkas and the clothes we have today. It was hard. I remember a lot of times I couldn't play outside when I was really small because I didn't have shoes to wear, you know. But that's just how it went, you know. You see, those half-breeds, they didn't have what the Indians had. The Indians got help, eh, but we didn't. See, we were in the middle. We were between the white and the Indians, so we were considered... From the white man we were considered Indians because... We used to hear them. We were living close to a French town and we used to hear them talk about us, and they'd talk French, you know, and they'd call us les sauvages, you know, and we knew that meant something about Indians. So anyway it didn't bother us, you know, but... So we were in between the two. We didn't fit either place.

Alma: Were you raised as a Metis or you always knew you were half-breed?

Ethel: Oh yes. Yes, we knew that because we used to listen to the older folks, eh, talk about the... how these Scotchmen come and settled here and married the Cree Indian women and that.

Alma: What do you recall about these stories? Is there any one that you remember most about your parents telling stories?

Ethel: Not too much, just that they married Indians. And you see one of those Isbisters are the first settlers here in Prince Albert, His name is Jim Isbister. And this... he's the first settler in Prince Albert, and you could check it by the land title office and it's recorded there.

Alma: After you got married did you move into the city?

Ethel: No. No, no, when I got married we farmed. It was wartime, Second World War was on and my husband here now, his three brothers went overseas, eh, and one didn't come back. He was killed and my... and his dad was a sickly man, so he was the only one on the farm to take care of his dad's farm. And after the war he gave us a quarter of land. Then we started farming on our own in Mont Nebo, that is. So that's where we raised our family. We have two boys and a girl. And our two sons now, they're in Montana and our daughter is in Lethbridge, Alberta.

Alma: I should have asked you, is there... When you were growing up, did your family or yourself, did you ever get any sort of discrimination because you were half-breed?

Ethel: Not too much, I don't think. I don't remember.

Alma: So you don't... you haven't never really experienced racism or discrimination?

Ethel: No, because up in the sticks over there there was nobody but them three old bachelors and they were glad to see the kids come around at that time, you know. You know, everybody was so happy to see one another long ago and if we went someplace seem like everybody was so happy to see you, but we went mostly to the half-breeds, eh, French half-breeds. And when they come, well, everybody just stopped and just visited, everything just stopped. When there was visitors we just stopped and we just visited.

Alma: That's how seldom you saw people, eh?

Ethel: Yeah. And if anybody come we were told never to, never to hang around grown-ups, eh, when they were visiting; so we used to go out and play and we were really shy, and we'd go and hide sometimes. So we didn't dare talk. We were too shy to talk for one thing. Anyway that's how, that's how it went.

Alma: You mean to tell me after you got married you, you farmed and then when did you move to the city? Like, what I want to know is, did anything change for you when you moved from your community where you were to where you are now? What is the most that you think changed for you?

Ethel: Well, first of all what moved us from the farm. We were doing all right on the farm. Farming, we raised everything, we raised our turkeys, our chickens, and had our

own butter, milk cows and that, and we picked our fruit, and we had good gardens, and we done our pickles so we didn't buy much of anything mostly sugar and tea or something we can't grow, eh. But that come out of egg money, a lot of that. So it really, you know... because we were shipping eggs, eh, selling eggs or shipping eggs, so it bought our groceries, the other little things, like. And from there we were doing good until after the Second World War and my husband begin to drink. Then he drank himself so poor that he couldn't even pay his taxes, so then he went to Montana to look for work. He left me with the three kids. And he had rented this place out just by word though, by mouth, eh, not in writing. And so he left us; he didn't even leave us with a penny. So then I had an incubator; I set the incubator, and then I sold some chicks out of there, and we were getting family allowance -- praise the Lord for all that! But anyway we... I got along. So I got thinking. We had the machinery here, I thought, and my boys big enough and I could get his brother to come and help put the crop in. So I went to the neighbours and I cancelled that deal, so I put the crop in. I went and bought some wheat and I got some seed -- we had lent out oats -- so I put oats and wheat in. And I remember telling my little, to my two little kids, "Let's kneel down and pray." I remember that, and I didn't even know how to pray then. So I took them two little kids of mine, I said, "Let's pray." So we knelt down by the cross there and prayed and that fall we had a real good crop, and that crop took John right out of the hole (inaudible). Then after that he rented it out with somebody else, eh, so we never owed anything ever since. We don't owe anything.

Alma: Is that when you moved?

Ethel: That's when we moved to Montana. So you see he was already in Montana so I went to Montana that fall with the kids. So there now, there now we got along really good. That's when I was working in the hospital there, but my kids were big then, eh. There was nobody at home. My girl was going to school -- I don't even remember what grade she was in; I don't know if it's seven or something like that -- so I'd work. We pretty well leave the same time as she left for school and then come back just about the same time, so it didn't bother her a bit, you know. But I thought if I was, you know, making her work too hard, eh, like homework, she had homework to do, but she (inaudible) okay. And then we moved back. My husband took sick in Montana, he got really sick. And I used to tell him, "John, we should move back to Saskatchewan, go and settle there. Now we're gettin' older," I'd tell him, "and we're coming to old age pension." And no, he didn't. He just loved that Montana country. But he took sick. Then I, then I brought my two boys and I bought him and put him in the hospital. Then again I prayed but I prayed (inaudible). I said, "Lord, I never ever asked you for any earthly thing," I said, "but this time I have a need. I have a need of a place to stay," I said, "so that I can take care of John." And here, there was somebody living in this apartment and the caretaker here put this somebody upstairs and in ten days I got this apartment. We've been here ever since, over

three years here now and I really like it.

Alma: Going back to my question earlier. When you moved from the farm when you said you went to work in Placid and when you moved to Montana, what was the biggest change that you saw or that you experienced?

Ethel: In Montana when I went there I was (inaudible). When I first went there they thought, my husband and my brother-in-law thought they were taking me to something, they took me from one bar to another bar and I didn't drink. (laughs) And those bars looked so gloomy, kind of gloomy, you know, half dark. And they'll take me to another one, you know, and then there was about eleven bars, and I would have a Coke. At last I was so bloated with Coke and I didn't care for Coke that much, and that was my first taking me around town, eh. And another thing I noticed, people would wash clothes on a Sunday, and they had the clothes hanging on the line, people are washing clothes. And I noticed people were going to the bars, the bars were not closed on Sundays. And things... I found it so different, I just, I just had to get used to them.

Alma: What about your lifestyle, the way you worked for your survival for your family? How did that change from the farm to Montana?

Ethel: It was easier. It was easier to work out than to... than to... To work out, to work eight hours is nothing for me. That's what I was working, eight hours a day. That was just a picnic to me. Come here to the farm. Farm work is hard work because you're up early and you go till you can't go anymore. All from morning till night, you know. So working out was easier for me.

Alma: Did you move into another sort of Metis or half-breed community?

Ethel: Not really. My one neighbour was a Blackfoot Indian, you know, but all around was white people.

Alma: So your ties with the people didn't weaken?

Ethel: No, no.

Alma: You always maintained your ties.

Ethel: Yeah. See the States don't look down on the Indians like they do here.

Alma: They don't?

Ethel: There was a big difference, even the doctor told us that.

Alma: How do you mean that?

Ethel: Well they just don't seem to... they just, you know, if they see an Indian they're just as happy to talk to them,

frindly like.

Alma: And you think it's different here?

Ethel: Well it used to be, used to be. Kind of look down on the Indians, eh. Yes it used to be, and you felt it. They didn't have to tell you, you felt it.

Alma: So you did feel discrimination at one time, eh?

Ethel: Yeah, yeah. Oh yes, I felt it. I could feel it, but they never said anything to me in Canada here, but yet you could feel it. You could sense that, you know. You could almost read their thoughts sometimes, eh. But that's one thing I found different, although I never was treated bad from white people, you know, but yet I could still feel it. They had, like, feeling higher up than an Indian or a half-breed, you know. They had that, you could sense it, eh. Like I was telling you about that lady there. I painted my walls kind of off-white and then I matched the flowers and the curtains and kind of orange/yellow in the plastic curtains, and she was surprised, you know, that I could match these colors, you know. And little do they know that we're all the same, you know. Indians, white men, they are no different. We all come from the same mother, just our skins is a different color.

(END OF SIDE A)

(END OF INTERVIEW)