

Billie Robison Interview
March 15, 2000
Regina, SK

Side A

Leah: We've got your mother, Mary Anne Amyotte.

Maria: See if we can get who her grandparents were, too.

Leah: So, your grandparents on your father's side?

Billie: FX Welsh, Francis Xavier. And my grandmother was Veronica Boulieau.

Leah: Where was your father raised?

Billie: ??

Maria: I'm sorry, did you get her mother's family's side?

Leah: So, on your mother's side?

Billie: Josephine (Blondeau?).

Leah: Do you know where Francis Xavier Welsh was born and where he was from?

Billie: I had all that information and I gave it to Randy. I think he was from Manitoba.

Leah: Randy who?

Billie: Joey's daughter, Randy.

Leah: What's his last name?

Billie: Randy's a girl, her name is (Demery?). I got this information from the history book in Lebret. They had one in 1990. I think they had a homecoming and they had a history book.

Leah: So we could find more information then, to check it out. So you were born on the Pasqua Reserve in 1932. How large was your family?

Billie: Seven sisters and six brothers.

Leah: So, very large. What is their names, Billie?

Billie: My oldest sister, Stella Josephine, Lawrence Frank, Ernest Eli, Marie (Billie), Norma, Pauline, Madeline, Veronica, Joseph...(tape cuts out)

Leah: Your father, Joseph, was born in Lebret, you were saying, right? Do you know what year he was born?

Billie: He was born in 1900.

Leah: Then your mother would have been born in...?

Billie: 1911.

Leah: That's Mary Anne Amyotte, right? 1911? So, is Mary Anne also from Manitoba, or Lebret?

Billie: No, she grew up in Lebret.

Leah: Oh, she was, too? A lot of family history in Lebret.

Billie: Yes. I think there used to be a lot of Michif in Lebret long ago.

Leah: What languages did your father speak, then?

Billie: Michif and French.

Leah: Your mother, too?

Billie: Yes.

Maria: They didn't speak Cree? Your father?

Billie: Isn't Michif Cree just a mixture of everything?

Maria: Yes, but sometimes people also spoke Michif and then they spoke Cree or Saulteaux besides. You don't know if he did?

Billie: Yeah, he did. My Grandpa Amyotte, he come from Belcourt Indian Reserve in North Dakota. It was part Ojibwa and Cree, I think.

Leah: On Belcourt?

Billie: Yes, Belcourt, North Dakota.

Leah: There's still a lot of Métis down there.

Billie: Yeah, there's a lot of Amyottes down there.

Leah: Did your family always identify as Michif or Métis?

Billie: As Michif, I think.

Leah: More identified as Michif?

Billie: Yes.

Leah: What do you remember most about your parents and their lifestyle, the work that they did?

Billie: My dad always worked on the farm. Not always, like they used to, but they used to clear brush and build roads and stuff like that, but mostly farming. And my mom just did the kids and everything else.

Leah: In charge of the family?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: How many years did your dad work as an Indian agent?

Billie: No, I don't know, I just learned that last summer from my brother, and he's coming again this summer, so...I wish he was here, he knows a lot of stuff. He lives in Alberta.

Leah: Which brother is that?

Billie: Ernie.

Maria: Where does he live?

Billie: He lives in Nanton, Alberta.

Leah: That would be interesting to get some more of that information from Ernie.

Billie: They're coming down in September. We got a headstone made for my mom's grave, so we're going to have a little due on that day, so they're all coming down.

Leah: Your mom never had a headstone for her grave?

Billie: No.

Leah: So this is a wonderful time to put that on, there?

Billie: Yes.

Maria: What do you remember most about your dad?

Billie: My dad was very quiet and he worked hard. He was a hard worker. He didn't talk much like we do.

Maria: Did he have an education? Did he go to school?

Billie: I don't think so. If he did go to school, it wasn't for very long.

Leah: Could he read and write?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: I guess being an Indian agent he'd have to have that ability. How about your mother, was she able to read and write?

Billie: Oh yeah. My mother had a grade eight education. When we moved to the...she used to do everybody's Christmas cards, she used to write letters for everybody, she used to read letters.

Leah: So for people who couldn't read at the...she would read letters to them?

Billie: Yeah, and write letters back.

Maria: That's what my mom used to do in our community, too.

Billie: I don't know what you'd call that.

Leah: It's good. That's interesting to know because some people couldn't read or write, and that's important to document.

Maria: She would have been important to the community.

Billie: Oh, she was...if a doctor came, she was always there.

Leah: Was she ever a midwife, or anything?

Billie: Yeah, she delivered babies. When she wasn't having them...

Maria: What was she like?

Billie: My mom was wonderful. She's the one that always played games with us, always showed us new games and stuff like that.

Leah: What kind of games did you guys play when you were little? Do you recall?

Billie: Chosh chung go la boyette. (?)

Leah: I've never heard of it, you've got to teach me about this one!

Billie: That's teeter-totter!

Maria: That's Michif.

Leah: Yes, that is Michif. You didn't know you had Michif, the word?

Maria: So, say it once more.

Billie: Chosh chung go la boyette. I think that last word sounds like French to me, doesn't it?

Maria: Yeah, Michif is.

Billie: We played baseball and hide and seek and all those things, but we used to have play houses in the bushes. We used to make them have rooms and everything in them. My mom used to save all the soup cans and all the boxes and everything.

Leah: Oh, she never threw a thing out and you used everything?

Billie: Yeah, we had a store, so...

Maria: So you had those all out in the bush?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: A mini trade store in the bush.

Billie: I've got a little story about me that's not very nice.

Maria: Are you going to tell us?

Billie: We were playing in the play house and it was time to cook, so I sent my 'husband' out hunting and he brought home a mouse and I cooked it—and they ate it!!

Leah: What was it like?

Billie: I don't know...

Leah: Did they know?

Billie: Sure, they did, like Pauline and ... I put carrots and potatoes and cooked it in a jam can. That's what I mean, we used to have so much fun, we'd do anything; we were kids.

Leah: You had a good childhood, then?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: Did you have to do a lot of work?

Billie: Yeah, like we always had our chores before we played. Like do our homework and our chores.

Leah: What kind of chores would you do, Billie, as a young woman?

Billie: As you got older, like I milked cows and split wood and hauled wood. I used to like doing that kind of stuff, real ambitious.

Leah: Did you ever help with meals? What were some of the foods when you were young that you remember?

Maria: What was your favourite?

Leah: Did you cook la boulets?

Billie: Oh yeah. Well, you know la boulets was really a New Year's meal. See, they used to get drunk New Year's and that was supposed to be good for a hangover, but when you make boulets and you don't thicken it, that's what they drank. When you thicken it, that's ___?___. I don't know when they started that because I remember never having ___?___ unless there's rabbit or duck or something.

Maria: So it was _____, and then when you thickened it, it was _____.

Billie: Yeah, but that's when they had it most was on New Year's Eve, or the day after New Year's and everybody had a hangover.

Leah: What did you guys do at New Year's?

Billie: Mostly, if Mom and Dad went to a party, we all went. Like I said, we had a place to sleep and a place for your horses. Or we'd go from one house to the other, then we went to the grandparents' for their blessings. We'd have breakfast with them, then we'd go to another one and we did this for a whole week, pretty well, from Christmas to New Year's. My dad's mom and dad, Grandpa Welsh had a sister who was barren; she couldn't have children, so, they gave my dad...her name was Emily Blondeau. So, we had so many grandmas and grandpas, which was really nice, like some kids have no grandparents.

Leah: Not like you did. You had the whole community of people raising you?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: What do you remember the most about those New Years'? Is there anything special that stands out?

Billie: Kissing people! There was a lot of laughter, a lot of fun and dancing and eating. It was like a feast. Anywhere you went somebody always had a feast and food ready. I'm still like that: if I don't have food when somebody comes, I feel bad. I always have something.

Leah: You're always prepared for that. Yes, you cook very beautiful food, it's wonderful.

Leah: Do you remember any types of songs? Was there a lot of music and things in your community?

Billie: Oh yeah.

Maria: Who played the music?

Billie: There was a lot of people around Lebret that played the music, the fiddle, mostly. Jim Pelletier used to play the fiddle. Mostly everybody I knew was fiddle music and singing in French. I don't know if you ever heard anything about this, maybe you did, but Gus ___ sang all those old Métis songs.

Leah: Did you ever hear any of them?

Billie: Oh yeah.

Maria: You knew the old man, eh?

Billie: Oh yeah, he was my uncle, my great uncle.

Maria: That was the old boat songs, eh?

Billie: I didn't understand them.

Maria: That's what they used to sing when they paddled the boat.

Leah: Beautiful music.

Maria: What was he like, that old man?

Billie: I liked him, he was fun, but he was mean to his horses. He had beautiful horses and he used to beat the crap out of them all the time.

Maria: That's a terrible thing, to have a reputation for beating your horses.

Leah: Is there any nicknames for your area, where you grew up?

Billie: No, there was a lot of them in Lebret, like Jackrabbit Street and there's Little Chicago and there was the ____ du ____ Lac. That's the people at the end of the lake, or something, I think that's what that means. A bunch of half-breeds used to live way down the end of ____ Lake. That's what they called them, ____ du ____ Lac, because they were kind of wild, I think. They were uncivilized.

Leah: They got a nickname really easily, eh?

Billie: Yeah. And there was ____ Highway.

Maria: What is a ____ Highway, tell us?

Billie: All these people lived along the river in Lebret and every time it rained it used to, I don't know what the soil was, gumbo or something, it used to get big holes in it. So they used to put their wood chips in to fill the holes up. That's why they call it ____ Highway.

Maria: Those wood chips are ____ ?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: Billie, what were weddings like in your time, when you were young, if you went to them?

Billie: They were really a nice celebration. We used to have lots of fun at weddings. Sometimes they'd last for two or three days. When my uncle got married, we were living up at the farm, everybody stayed at our place. I think there was eight or ten of us in one bed, all of us fighting. But they were great, they always had lots of good food.

Maria: Did they fix up the horses and stuff?

Billie: Oh yeah. My Uncle Frank got married in the wintertime, so they used the ____ and the horses were all decked out and they drove around town.

Maria: What was it like in courtship? Were girls allowed to go out with boys without anybody watching?

Billie: I think starting in my sister's time, it wasn't like that anymore.

Maria: What was it like for you?

Billie: You couldn't bring your boyfriend in the house. You had to meet him outside, but there was no...

Maria: No big rules or regulations?

Billie: No, but you had to be home at a certain time. I think in those days, if parents brought you up right, they trusted you to do the right thing when you went out, and we always did. There was no not listening to your parents, then.

Maria: What happened to you if you didn't listen?

Billie: Oh, probably get a good licking with a stick, or something. I was always good.

Leah: You didn't push it, eh?

Billie: When we lived on the south side of the valley in Lebret...

Maria: Did your area have a name?

Billie: No, we lived on somebody's farm. We used to, in the morning, we used to set snares, go home, and we'd have supper. Everyday, somebody caught two or three rabbits.

Leah: Do you like rabbit meat?

Billie: I did then, yeah. I don't know if I'd eat it now, but that's what we lived on – rabbit or fish.

Leah: When you snared them, how did you prepare them, usually, your rabbits, for eating?

Billie: Well, my mom did it. She skinned them and usually boiled them and made _____. It was good.

Leah: Did she ever use spices, or anything in her...?

Billie: No. I still don't. I do use them once in a while because now, the way they process food, you got to make it taste like food. All I ever used was salt and pepper.

Leah: What about the fish? Is there any particular way you like to eat fish?

Billie: It depends what kind it was. If it was perch, we used to bake it in the oven whole like that – open them up and peel the skin back and eat the eggs and everything. I think we used to make soup with whitefish. It just all depends on what kind you had.

Leah: When did your family move to the Métis farm?

Billie: I think it was 1940.

Leah: Were you one of the first families to go out to the Métis farm?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: How were families put there and why were they put there? How would you get on to the Métis farm?

Billie: Well, that piece of property was given to the Métis people by the _____ fathers. When we moved up there, school was out. I think we lived in a tent for three months because the houses weren't ready.

Maria: In the summertime?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: What were some of the other families that were at the Métis farm when you moved there?

Billie: There was Blondeau and Desjarlais, other families, two or three Desjarlais families.

Leah: Yes, these are some of the common names, the Blondeaus, Desjarlais, Martins. Did you guys have to apply? Did your father have to apply?

Billie: You know I don't remember that, I really don't. Because I think I was around maybe eight or nine years old.

Leah: Well, did you get your school there? Is that where they allowed you to go to school?

Billie: Yes. I went to school in Lebret.

Leah: So you didn't get your schooling on the Métis farm, then?

Billie: No.

Maria: Did they ever build a school on the Métis farm?

Billie: No.

Leah: What did the Métis do on the farm?

Billie: Well, they did farming.

Leah: They just did the farming – provided crops and learned the trade?

Billie: Yeah. We had our own meat, eggs, they grew everything.

Leah: Self-sufficient?

Billie: Yeah. They planted crops.

Leah: So you enjoyed your time on the farm?

Billie: Oh, it was the best years of my life, I think. My dad, he worked in the pig pen up there, and I think they had around six or seven thousand pigs. That place was horrible. He used to eat his lunch in there and everything. You couldn't even breathe. I guess you got used to it, but then you got emphysema. When he got sick, then we had to move. That's when we moved to the road allowance.

Maria: Why did you have to move when he got sick? They wouldn't let him stay there?

Billie: No. They had to hire somebody else.

Leah: So if you couldn't work, you couldn't stay there?

Billie: No.

Maria: That's sure not what they try to get you to believe.

Leah: Yeah. So, with the Métis farm, I don't know if you would know this, what did they do with all the food if the families didn't eat it all? Do you know? That's a lot of food they're producing there.

Billie: They sold it. They sold eggs and cream and...that's what I mean, it was self-sufficient. We made butter and...

Maria: Everything got sold, eh?

Billie: Yeah. When they butchered a cow or something, it didn't go to waste, they ate every part of the cow, except the hooves, I think. They made glue out of them.

Maria: So, I'm really curious about this: they didn't let anybody stay if they were sick? Were there any other people that had to leave?

Billie: Not that I know of. Most people that were there, my dad and Uncle Bert, stayed there the longest. Otherwise, people would just come and they'd quit and other people would move. It was really a big turnover of people. When they worked up there, they got \$30 a month relief, like they got for wages.

Maria: So it was called relief, but it was really their wages?

Billie: You never got cash for it. You had to buy, you had to give it to the store to buy all your soap and stuff like that.

Maria: It's interesting they would call it relief when it was your wages.

Billie: Well, that's what I call it. I really don't know what it was because anything else, we got all our milk and eggs and everything free. How my mother bought clothes and shoes for all of us, I'll never know.

Leah: There wasn't a store then?

Billie: We did have a little grocery store up there for a while.

Maria: Who was the boss, there? Was it Métis people that were the bosses?

Billie: No. When we first went up there, it was a priest that ran the place. Father Duplain was his name. I think he molested all of us. It kind of turned everything off, for me, you know. When you have your community all living together and helping and something like that happens, it spoils it.

Maria: So that was common knowledge among all the kids, then?

Billie: Yeah. The parents didn't believe it. It was never sexual, it was fondling, mostly. The priest had a car, and if you wanted to go to the doctor, or anything, well, he had to take you. We had to go to Balcarres to go to the doctor.

Leah: It was the nearest doctor, was in Balcarres?

Billie: Yeah. Many times, say if we were walking home from school, we used to run in the bush and hide so he couldn't pick us up.

Leah: So you really made sure to keep your distance from the priest, then?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: Was he always the boss of that, or was it eventually taken over by...

Billie: It was taken over by...who after that? Social Services, I think. You know, right up until the late seventies, those guys were only getting \$75 a month. Outrageous. It wasn't a lot for...you worked from sunup to sundown.

Leah: Long days.

Maria: No wonder they didn't stay very long.

Billie: Yeah. When my dad looked after the pigs, he had to sleep there when they were having little ones. He stayed right there. Because if the pig had little ones, then you had to watch so they didn't lay on them and kill them. The other thing he used to do was castrate everything. Should've done the priest (laughs). After that, it was usually white guys that were the foremen. Most of them were nice.

Maria: So it really was only a workplace? It wasn't owned by the people or anything?

Billie: No. I guess it could've been, but it seems like after we left, everything just changed. Later on, they gave it back to the Métis people. That's when the Lafontaines had it. So then Social Services took it back and, again, they gave it back to them.

Leah: Shifted. There's been a lot of change there, ups and downs and different leadership.

Maria: What happened after you guys moved? You moved from there to the road allowance when your dad got sick?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: How many years were you on the Métis farm, then?

Billie: Nine years.

Leah: You would've been how old when you left the farm?

Billie: I was 15.

Maria: So you moved from there to the road allowance? What was it like on the road allowance?

Billie: Well, we didn't know it was the road allowance. (laughs) I never heard of 'road allowance,' not even that long ago and then I got excited – I lived on the road allowance. I guess a lot of people did, but we didn't know.

Leah: Well, who was all there when you moved there? You were 15. What other people were there?

Billie: Well, my grandpa lived up there, and my aunt. There was people all over.

Maria: Which grandpa and which aunt?

Billie: Grandpa St. Peter Blondeau was the one that adopted Dad. They were farther apart the families up there, but there was a lot of Métis people. We had lots of fun.

Maria: Where did you go to school?

Billie: I went to school in Lebret.

Leah: What was the school named? A public school?

Billie: Yeah. Lebret Public School, I guess it was.

Leah: It wasn't run by the church then, Billie, or was it?

Billie: The nuns taught school, so it must've.

Maria: So it was a separate school?

Billie: Well, there was all Catholics there. I don't think there was such a thing as separate school, then. I really don't...

Maria: Was everybody a Catholic or was there any people that were more traditional?

Billie: Yeah, everybody I knew were Catholic.

Maria: Did you grow up with any stories about roogaroos or anything like that?

Billie: Yeah, but I think they used them for scare tactics. Especially during Lent, they used to tell us if you went dancing during Lent, your legs would dry up. Well, it was true in my case!

Maria: Your legs dried up?

Billie: Yeah. (laughs) Or, this big, black dog would follow you home. I just never believed in stuff like that.

Maria: You never saw one, eh?

Billie: No.

Leah: Those black dog stories, were there many of them? Did people...

Billie: No. Maybe there was, but I just never paid attention to them. When anything, my grandparents, especially got together, they spoke French most of the time.

Leah: So it was very hard to follow, sometimes?

Billie: Yeah. If they had something to say that they didn't want you to hear, they used to send you away.

Maria: So you never heard any kind of stories?

Billie: No. I think that was pretty well out already, when we were growing up.

Leah: Changing times.

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: Did you have horses? Did your family have horses?

Billie: Yeah, we had horses.

Leah: Was that your main form of transportation as a family?

Billie: Yeah. I had this horse, his name was...(tape cuts out)...go to town and buy groceries and stuff like that. No one would drive the horse, the horse would walk up to a post and stop...laughs. She used to say, "Don't go there, don't do that!" But he was so used to it, he'd just walk up to a telephone pole anywhere and stop.

Maria: So, how long were you guys on the road allowance, or in that place?

Billie: I think maybe two or three years.

Maria: How old were you when your mom died?

Billie: I was 17.

Maria: Were you married?

Billie: No. There was 11 younger than me.

Maria: So you became the mother?

Billie: Well, I remember my sister Kathy was born when my mom died. She was born in September and in January, they didn't know what they were going to do with her, she was still in the hospital...(tape cuts out)...decided she was going to take her. So they called me and I went and took the train to Balcarres and got here. There was a big snow storm. I had 35 cents in my pocket, I thought...worst day of my life...I went wacky, too, so it was like having another kid...never fixed anything. Our house had holes in the floors and hardly ever had any windows. It was just no place to bring a baby, I guess. You know, I think the worst thing is to lose your mother, you lose everything...(cannot understand a piece of the tape)...dad was kind of half-assed looking after us. It was like, nobody gave us anything, we had no clothes. Pauline bought a pair of shoes and I'd wear them to go to work, and I'd buy shoes and...it was horrible, we didn't have even a bra, or anything. But Social Services paid my aunt to supervise us.

Maria: But they didn't buy clothes, or anything?

Billie: No. And then the social worker used to come down and visit us every week and made passes at us. Dad used to drink a lot, and he used to bring all these old guys home. I knew them. They were pedophiles, I think. They were always molesting some kids.

Maria: It was hard, eh?

Billie: It was horrible. They went there in the back of a truck. I wonder if something happened to Joey, there. Joey is very private, he won't talk about anything – what he's thinking, or...

Maria: It must have affected everybody.

Leah: When you were living on the road allowance, did other people in Lebret treat you differently?

Billie: Not really. But after mom died the seminary used to give us food, used to take the buggy down there, there was ___ and cakes and desserts and bread – everything. Every day we used to go for a load. We had a ___ baseball team and we called them the Seminary Crapeaters, that's my baseball team. (laughs) But, if it wasn't for that, I think we'd have starved to death. My dad was totally useless.

Maria: How did you feel about having to go down there and get food, and have them give it to you? Do you think it did something to you?

Billie: No, I liked to eat too much. Nobody ever teased us, or anything, I don't know. I used to make fun of it myself. I think I always had really a great sense of humour. I think that's what got me through everything.

Maria: It got a lot of people through everything, having a sense of humour. How old were you when you got married?

Billie: I was 25.

Maria: Oh really? You were getting on in years. Most people got married when they were young. What did you do?

Billie: Pauline and I worked as a nurse's aid in the hospital and I worked in cafes and at the hotel in Lebret. That was fun, too, because they still had open air skating rinks and they used to have moccasin dances and played the Tennessee Waltz all night.

Maria: What's a moccasin dance?

Billie: You wore your moccasins to dance on the ice, on the skating rink, I guess that's what it was. You couldn't stand up, it's too slippery.

Leah: When your mother was alive, did she ever do beadwork?

Billie: No, she never had time.

Maria: Did she sew clothes for the kids and make things?

Billie: She did a lot of patching, but my Auntie Margaret, my mom's sister, was really good, so she used to make us jackets and stuff like that.

Leah: Where did you learn to sew, then, Billie?

Billie: Just from watching. Well, I'm teaching myself, more or less. My problem is, I can't follow directions; that's my downfall. My Grandma Amyotte used to crochet, she used to make diamond socks to send to the boys overseas, and she could never even speak English. Never had a pattern, just looked at a picture and did it.

Leah: So you must have had family that went overseas then in World War II?

Billie: Yeah, my uncles.

Leah: Who were they, Billie?

Billie: Mom's brothers, Paul, John.

Leah: I didn't realize, John Amyotte, he's in our Métis Veterans book. I will have to give you one of those books.

Billie: He was a twin.

Maria: Did his twin join the army, too?

Billie: No. There was something physically wrong with him. I don't remember what it was. They weren't identical twins. There was John, Paul...Frank.

Maria: They made it back?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: Were they wounded or anything?

Billie: Not really.

Maria: Were they in the army? Do you remember what they belonged to? The Rifles or the Regina Rifles...

Billie: Yeah. Regina Rifles. I think that's all there was in the... (Princess Patricia?)

Leah: Was there a lot of Métis that you know of who went into the war?

Billie: Oh yeah, in Lebret there was a lot of them.

Leah: I wonder why they went?

Billie: I think for the money. They all came back, like that war wrecked more nice people than I can count. Drunks and, totally just destroyed them. My Uncle Frank was the youngest. I don't know how old he was when he joined the army. He came home, got married, had four kids, and died of a brain tumor. He was only 40 years old.

Leah: Did you guys ever build your own homes?

Billie: Oh yeah.

Leah: Were they log houses?

Billie: Yeah. When we moved to the road allowance, when you had to sleep in one room, like there was 14 of us...

End of Side A

Side B

...to get it done faster, is that why?

Billie: I don't know, she just liked doing it.

Maria: Makes it really good in the troughs. It's better than doing it with your hands or fingers.

Billie: We didn't help with the mudding, but I remember white-washing and things like that.

Leah: Did your father do a lot of hunting when you were young?

Billie: My uncles did. He worked all the time, that's the one thing I'll say about my dad. He worked hard, right from the time when he could.

Leah: Did you ever work with him, like go on some of these...?

Billie: I used to go get hay with him, hay for our horses, but the boys always were with him.

Leah: Did you guys ever have a garden?

Billie: Oh yeah. We used to pick berries, my mom did tons and tons of canning, she used to can everything.

Leah: What berries did you pick?

Billie: Saskatoons, chokecherries, peminas. Do you know what peminas are?

Maria: Oh, that's high bush cranberries. Well, 'pembina' is cranberry in, Saulteaux or Cree?

Leah: Saulteaux, I think.

Billie: Gooseberries, there used to be so many berries around here, now there are raspberries. I think that's one thing the farmers did is killed everything off. Even you have to go miles to find a tiger lily, which is our national flower. I only ever see them up north.

Leah: So were there a lot of good berry-picking places around Lebret?

Billie: Oh yeah. You didn't have to go far, either. There's a bush in the garden and they call it skunk bush and don't ask me why, but I just like to go there to look. You've never seen anything as beautiful as the cranberry hanging from the trees and in different colours. Oh, they're gorgeous.

Maria: How did you preserve them?

Billie: I think they used to bury them for a while.

Leah: So do you cook a lot with the berries? Do you use them in anything?

Billie: Yeah, we used to make (gertoe ?). Gertoe is pressed chokecherries and pork rind. We used to call it (toe roe?).

Maria: What's le gren, then?

Billie: Le gren is a chokecherry.

Maria: That's the patties, eh?

Billie: Chokecherries, yeah. The cranberries have these big, flat seeds in them. We used to make prayer beads with them.

Maria: With the seeds?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: You mean like the rosary?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: Really? And people used them?

Billie: As far as I know, they did.

Maria: Road allowance rosary.

Billie: Yeah, half-breed rosary. Cardboard is half-breed plywood. Bologna is half-breed steak. (laughs) We lined our house with cardboard and put wallpaper on it, like it looked nice, insulated it. I don't remember being cold or hungry.

Maria: Isn't that amazing? I often think that, too. They talk about how poor everybody was and you read about how poor everybody was, but I can't remember starving or being cold.

Billie: You don't have to have a meal with 14 things.

Maria: No, you don't have to have salad, potatoes, meat, and gravy, eh?

Billie: Lots of times we used to eat bannock and crushed chokecherries. I can remember at Christmas time, we always got stuff that somebody made. I'd like to make a museum with toys we used to have. Rag dolls and cardboard houses, and just show it somewhere. The boys they made

horseshoes with tin cans. We used to make nice mud pies and decorate them with roses and kiniuks, that's a rose huck.

Leah: Like rose hips?

Billie: Yeah.

Maria: Okiniuk.

Billie: Is that what it is?

Maria: Yeah, well a little different Cree.

Leah: But that's what she's saying in Michif, eh?

Maria: Yeah.

Leah: Do you have anything left of those toys?

Billie: No. I thought that would be so neat for my grandchildren to see. Get the boys to make toys and some rag dolls. Only thing, we don't wear those kind of stockings anymore.

Leah: How did your mother dress? What were some of the styles?

Billie: She wore dresses most of the time, just house dresses.

Maria: Did she make them herself?

Billie: Oh, maybe she did, I just don't remember. I think Mom was kind of in a place where her older sisters handed down stuff.

Leah: Did you have any favourite aunts or uncles that you were close to?

Billie: My Auntie Margaret, she's the one that they found in the ditch dead five years ago.

Leah: She must have been very old, eh?

Billie: No, she wasn't, she was only 68 or 69, but she was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. She walked out of the house one night and disappeared. You know where the trellis is in Fort Qu'Appelle and there's just kind of a little slough on the side of the road, that's where they found her. There's water there, she took her toque off and pulled her coat over her head and just went to sleep. She died of exposure. The weird thing is, her husband drowned, too...she was a sweetie.

Maria: What were your grandparents like? Did they spend lots of time with you and tell you stories?

Billie: Yeah. Grandma Welsh used to tell us stories in Cree. We didn't know what she was talking about. My dad still has a sister in town here. She was telling me, like she told us stories of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and stuff like that in French. She couldn't speak a word of English. At night, mostly, that's what put us to sleep was her stories. Or mom would read a story out of a book and then she'd tell it to us after.

Leah: So she'd read it to herself and then just tell it, like a real expressive story?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: Was there certain jobs that you did during each season?

Billie: You mean at home?

Leah: Yeah.

Billie: Yeah, like we, in the wintertime we had to haul snow for water or we had to haul wood out of the bushes and saw it up. I used to like doing those things.

Leah: What about in the spring? What were some of the things that you had to do?

Billie: Cleaning up mostly, like the yard, getting things ready for a garden, housecleaning.

Maria: Is that when you plastered the house and did all those kinds of things?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: The summer for the kids was probably just berry-picking and...

Billie: Yeah. Well, you know, we used to live up the hill from the seminary, where the priests used to go. They always entertained us, like we had a lot of fun with them. They had a cabin way down on _____ Lake and they used to take us out there for two or three days at a time. Of course, we had catechisms. We had to pray all the time. Berry-picking time wasn't until July or August; and we'd start putting stuff away for the winter.

Leah: Do you know if there were game restrictions? Were the Métis restricted in hunting and trapping? Did you ever hear stories about that?

Billie: Not that I know of.

Maria: You never heard of anybody getting picked up for shooting a deer or anything like that?

Billie: No, there wasn't.

Leah: What was it like for women during the time when you were young?

Billie: When I think about it, I think it was awful.

Leah: Why?

Billie: Because the women looked after the kids, they did everything – the cooking, the cleaning, watching the kids, and the sewing. My mother was always busy doing something. Weekends, usually they partied and went to church.

Maria: How were they treated?

Billie: Well, the ones I remember were treated okay. I didn't see any abuse, not physical, anyway, or even arguing or anything.

Maria: I guess people were just too busy, eh?

Billie: When I had my kids, I enjoyed them when they were young. I was busy; I really loved bringing up my kids. After they were gone, that's when...I imagine all women feel like that. You have a job to do – bring up your kids and try to teach them right and stuff like that. When I think about it now, I did a good job, and I thought I didn't.

Leah: How many children do you have, then?

Billie: Nine.

Maria: What was your husband's name?

Billie: Gordon Robison.

Maria: Was he Métis?

Billie: No.

Leah: Do you ever remember any Métis politics? You've been around for a while, now, did you ever see any of that – the start of the political organization?

Billie: I remember that. It sounded very good. All the speeches everybody made about what they were going to do, but they're still saying the same thing.

Leah: When did you notice Métis politics started to happen? On the Métis farm, or...?

Billie: No, I was living in Fort Qu'Appelle then. That would be maybe 1970-71. Like they had a winter warmth project and we all got sheets and warm blankets. It was good, they fixed people's houses and they did a lot of good things at the beginning.

Leah: Who ran that winter warmth program?

Billie: I think it was Horace Amyotte. I think he's a southeast area director. And Ray, Ray ___ was there, too. He was in Regina, but he was...

Leah: Involved in Fort Qu'Appelle?

Billie: Yeah, he still was because they fixed Auntie Rhoda's house up in Indian Head a couple years ago. It sounded really good...I guess it doesn't work for us.

Maria: Why do you think it doesn't work for us? Why do you feel that something is wrong?

Billie: I think it's our leadership. If they had grew up in my time when they still liked to live like a Métis person, when things are simple. Once they get up there, then they turn white. I think we need younger people and honest people, but where you going to find honest people in Saskatchewan? There was a lot of fighting amongst them, too, going against each other. I remember Bob Fisher, he had a crew where they used to fix houses and stuff like that. He had a file on one guy, and this guy had a file on the other guy and they were all threatening each other and it was so stupid. That's when it really started; people started stealing stuff right from the beginning. They had dead people voting.

Leah: Do you think there was some family rivalries going on?

Billie: I don't know if it was family rivalries, I think it was greed, more.

Maria: Who was the most memorable character that you ever remember when you were growing up that you've never forgotten? You know we always have one person that we always think about, and you kind of laugh or feel kind of sad or they give you kinds of memories.

Billie: I think that has to be my (mooshim?) St. Peter Blondeau. Like he was a character, but he was strict and he was bossy and he'd sit up in the

chair and company would always sit there. Everybody gathered around and just listened to him. It was like a magnet, he just drew people. I used to listen to him talk, but I didn't know what he was saying because he was talking in Cree or whatever.

Maria: What did he look like?

Billie: He was a very distinguished old guy. He had a beard and long, shoulder length hair. He looked like a god, or something. (laughs) He had a cane and a white horse, when you saw him coming, boy, you just straightened right up.

Leah: Did he dress up?

Billie: Just casual. He was just such a character. I wish Joey would've known him. He knew him, but he was just little, it's not anything he'd remember.

Leah: That's such a beautiful name, St. Peter.

Billie: I don't know how come they call him – I guess that's who he looked like, St. Peter. His name was Peter, I guess, so they called him St. Peter. He walked straight and tall.

Leah: Was he very proud?

Billie: Yeah, he was.

Leah: Was he like the buffalo hunting Métis, or was he part of a different lifestyle?

Billie: I don't know. He could've been because my grandma's dad was a buffalo hunter and fell off his horse and injured his back, or something. He was bedridden for years. I know my grandma was that high (gestures) and she looked after him. I wonder how did he go to the bathroom. He used to hide jelly beans in his bed all over. The other thing about Mooshim St. Peter was he never bribed you. He never had candies or anything. Just his presence made you sit up and take notice.

Maria: He was kind?

Billie: Yeah, he was.

Leah: Do you have any pictures of these people, Billie?

Billie: No. I have a picture of my grandpa and grandma, my mom's mom and dad. I don't have a picture of Grandma and Grandpa Welsh. That's the picture up there that's my mom's mom and dad, that oval shaped picture.

Leah: Do you have any other copies of that picture?

Billie: No, but I don't know, if you could take it and copy it, I'd let you. People have copied it, I don't know who'd have a negative, but if you want to do that, I'd let you.

Leah: I'd sure love to for GDI. We'll make extra copies for you, too.

(Discussing and showing pictures.)

Maria: Are these pictures taken at Lebret?

Billie: Yeah. As far as I know, they were. The priest used to take these pictures.

Maria: I wonder if they have more in the church archives.

Billie: You know, I looked through there. They have some hanging up. I was looking for a picture of my mom, but we could never find a picture of her. Randy's got some pictures of the kids, of Joey and them when they were little. She was going to get some copies made for me. She hasn't done it yet.

(comments about Uncle Norbert – 26.6)

Leah: Are these moccasins here, Billie?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: So most everyone did wear moccasins?

Billie: Yeah.

Leah: Did you ever make moccasins?

Billie: No.

Leah: It looks like the kids are wearing shoes here?

Billie: Yeah.

End of Tape