

Tape Transcript

Title: Solomon Ballantyne - Fiddle player

Media: DAT

Interviewer: John Leclair

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Text

John: I'm talking to Solomon Ballantyne who is a fiddle player and a resident of Stanley Mission. Translating for me is Caroline Ballantyne, his daughter and asking questions. We're talking about Rapid River and we'll get to that in a moment. Your parents, who were they, Sol?

Solomon: Amelia, and Benjamin was my father.

John: You mother's maiden name was what?

Solomon: Bear.

John: Where were they from?

Solomon: From herd, both of them.

John: And your grandparents, where were they from?

Solomon: Caroline was my grandmother.

John: Where was she from?

Solomon: From England (**Note – Likely Scotland, as the people in this region do not differentiate between Scotland and England*). My grandfather's name was Lazarus Ballantyne.

John: Where was he from?

Solomon: He was from Deschambeault Lake.

John: Do you know where they came from before that?

Solomon: My grandfather had worked here for the Hudson's Bay Company, and they worked for them to gather moosemeat and they fed the people who couldn't provide for themselves.

John: Where were you born, Sol?

Solomon: Trade Lake.

John: How big was your family?

Solomon: Seven sisters and myself. There's only two of us left now. Two died in infancy.

John: How many are still living?

Solomon: One living now, Maggie Charles.

John: Did your family ever own any land?

Solomon: We owned land at Trade Lake but it was just a trapline.

John: Do you remember anyone talking about Scrip back then?

Solomon: No, we were just given land where we could fish and hunt.

John: Like a designated trapline?

Solomon: Yes, but it was restricted to the person that it was given to.

John: So your dad hunted. Did he trap?

Solomon: Yes.

Break

Ben Ballantyne, Solomon's son, explains:

There was a lot of bad medicine going on around here, and my great great grandfather was cursed. He couldn't have boys for seven generations. I'm the second generation. Grandpa had two brothers and he lost the boys too. It was all women.

John: Yes, that's what I want to talk about, some of the old customs and traditional spirituality things. Because it's really tough around here because it's so tied to the church.

Solomon: He (my grandfather) tried to save two of his boys. In the fall he took two of his boys into the lake, and I guess they were boys at the time. One survived and the other one was froze. The lake was frozen. One made it over the winter and the other one died.

John: Okay, I've got this on tape now. I'd like to finish some of the basic questions now, and then we can get to the music and some of the old medicine and so on.

Ben: Okay.

John: When you were living on the trapline at Trade Lake did you have a garden out there?

Solomon: Yes.

John: Did you have any other animals there other than dogs for sleighs? Anything like cattle or pigs?

Solomon: No.

John: Okay, when you were growing up, did you think of yourself as poor compared to other people, in La Ronge or at Grandmother's Bay, or did you think of yourselves as pretty well off?

Solomon: I didn't think I was poor because I had everything that people can ask for, living off the land.

John: Did you go to school, Sol?

Solomon: One week. (Laughter)

John: Why only one week?

Solomon: They kept people (kids) in the trapline because that's where the work was. There was no violence over there, no booze, and no stealing.

John: When you were growing up did you ever hear the word "half-breed" or "Métis?"

Solomon: There was Métis here and there was the odd White guy that was here.

John: Because your grandmother was Scottish, did you consider yourself Mixed Blood, or did you consider yourself Native?

Solomon: I'm not really sure.

John: Not sure. Everybody was pretty much the same back then, though, right?

Solomon: No, my grandmother had red curly hair and blue eyes.

John: Were their children looked at differently than others because they had lighter skin?

Solomon: No, everybody was treated equally, White and Cree.

John: Do you think the language had a lot to do with that?

Solomon: Yes, the main language was Cree, even the ones that came up here, the White people, they learned to speak the language.

John: So that kept everybody equal.

Solomon: Yes.

John: Did you consider yourself Native or did you consider yourself a half-breed?

Solomon: No, I thought I was Cree.

John: I'd like to talk about music for a bit. What were your dances like? What was it like when you had dances when you were growing up?

Solomon: We had waltzes, two step, square dances.

John: Jigs?

Solomon: Yes, jigs.

John: Red River Jig?

Solomon: Yes.

John: Do you remember dances like the Duck Dance, Drops of Brandy?

Solomon: Yes, those are the old dances and those were the dances they did back then.

John: Do you remember how they danced the Duck Dance?

Solomon: I remember they would make a circle of about 12 people and they would go underneath 2 people holding hands and then they would go on, I guess, just like making a braid.

John: So it was always weaving together and was always continuous?

Solomon: Yes, continuous.

John: Do you remember the Scarf Dance?

Ben: That's like Métis, right?

John: I don't know if it's necessarily Métis.

Solomon: I didn't see those in my days but my dad did. They would start paddling here and go to Winnipeg to get supplies and my dad knew how to play violin and he remembers seeing those dances. They were wearing the "pakwattahunak" (sashes).

John: I've heard from people in the community here that there was a Scarf Dance that they used to do locally using a scarf that you would wear around your neck. And the women used to put it over the man, and bring him in. Do you remember that?

Solomon: Yes.

John: What was that called in Cree?

Solomon: Tapiskagan Asimowin. (Scarf Dance)

**Note – The scarves referred to in these dances are the ones that women wore to cover their hair. Elders still wear these scarves in Stanley Mission.*

John: That's probably the one we're thinking of then. Were there any other languages spoken in this community besides Cree?

Solomon: Chipewyan (Dene) and French, but the main language was Cree. There was a guy who came here from Italy.

John: Joe Visentine.

Solomon: Yes, and he didn't speak one word of Cree, but in later years that's all he spoke was Cree, he didn't speak his language anymore.

John: But he didn't speak English?

Solomon: He spoke English a little bit.

John: What role did religion play in your life? Did you go to church? Did your parents go to church?

Solomon: Anglican was the one religion they followed to the end. Christmas we would leave the cabins and come here to Stanley Mission, and even Easter we would come to church. Even if it was really hard to travel over the river we made it here.

John: At Christmas time how long did they stay here?

Solomon: A few days.

John: You did a lot of visiting with people?

Solomon: Yes. A lot of us stayed in tepees when we came over here because there were no cabins or no relatives to stay with. Because our home was the trapline, that's where we made our living.

John: Tell me about the tepees. How were they made?

Solomon: They were made from moosehide.

John: Were they heavy to carry?

Solomon: Not too bad. Same weight as these 14 by 16 (canvas) tents.

John: You stayed in those in the summertime too though?

Solomon: Yes.

John: Did people in this community practice the traditional ways instead of the church?

Solomon: No, there was none of that around, just religion.

John: But some people still believed it?

Solomon: There's a lot of people who believed in that, but once you're baptized in the Holy Church, you can't do bad medicine. My grandfather was a medicine man, and he was a bad medicine man. And nobody today can do what he did back then.

John: Okay, thanks. That's all I need for that. Was there any racial discrimination with the people here between the church, or police or HBC?

Solomon: The Resources officers were bad back then. They teamed up with the RCMP back then. We had to hide our moose hides so the Company wouldn't see them in our house. We used to take them someplace in the bush so the government didn't see them. That was racism. They didn't want Native people to get too rich by selling furs and hides.

John: Like mitts and moccasins and things like that?

Solomon: Yes.

John: How about selling furs to the company?

Solomon: There was a time that the furs were open. You could sell mink, lynx and beaver, but when it was time to quit trapping. You couldn't come to the community and sell pelts because nobody would take them, and if you got caught with them, you could get arrested.

John: When you travelled to La Ronge did you find any stores that refused to serve you because you were Native?

Solomon: No, there was about three stores there but Native people ran them all.

John: Was there a hotel there?

Solomon: No.

John: So you didn't really see much discrimination back then?

Solomon: No.

John: One question I forgot to ask. What year were you born in Sol?

Solomon: 1936.

John: The people up here with lighter skin, were they considered luckier than people with darker skin? With the Company or police?

Solomon: No, about the same.

John: So everyone was pretty much equal back then. Like we talked about earlier, it was because of the language?

Solomon: Yes.

John: If a white person came up and married a Native person was that okay with the community?

Solomon: Yes, that was Okay?

John: Where was the closest doctor?

Solomon: La Ronge.

John: Do you think that the people in Stanley Mission got the same kind of care that the White people in La Ronge got?

Solomon: I'm not sure.

John: Did any of your family ever serve in either war?

Solomon: No. There were some people who were signed to go but the war ended.

John: What did you use for transportation when you were growing up?

Solomon: Canoes, and dogs.

John: How many dogs did you have in a team?

Solomon: 4 to 6.

John: What did you do for entertainment?

Solomon: Soccer and dances. Target shooting in the springtime with a .22 or a rifle. We had a game called "Niwachihakan" that was played with a bone needle and leather and knuckles from caribou bones.

John: When did you start playing fiddle?

Solomon: I was about 18.

John: Your father played fiddle?

Solomon: Yes.

John: And your grandfather?

Solomon: No.

John: Where did your father learn fiddle?

Solomon: Somebody taught him from Big River.

John: Do you remember his name?

Solomon: Antoine Cook. He was Métis from Big River.

John: Did he have relatives here?

Solomon: Yes. That's where the Cooks came from.

John: When you started playing fiddle, which song did you start playing?

Solomon: It was called "The First Song." (Laughter)

John: Could you play that for me?

Sol plays "Little Brown Jug."

John: Did you ever learn any old Métis songs from your father?

Solomon: I know some of them.

John: Could you play one or two of them?

Sol plays "Lord McDonald's Reel," also known as "Old Reel of Four."

John: Do you know what this is called in Cree? I've heard it called "Go and get that old man who knows how to play the fiddle."

Solomon: It's called "Neyo Asimowin." (Four People Dancing)

John: Do you know any other tunes?

Sol plays a reel.

John: Sounds good. I don't know the name of that tune.

Solomon: That's one my dad learned from Antoine Cook.

John: I think I need to learn that one. (Laughter) Do you remember any tunes played where the fiddle was tuned differently? Like I tuned it yesterday?

Solomon: My dad sat differently when he played, when he played with a different tuning. (laughing).

John: Why was that?

Solomon: I don't know, he just did. (laughing)

John: When they tuned it differently, was there a name for that?

Solomon: Yes, it was called the Devil's Song.

John: Do you remember any tunes that were played with that tuning?

Solomon: When we used to tune our fiddles like that we tuned up the biggest string and played the Red River Jig.

John: Okay, I'm going to pause the tape now and tune the fiddle so Sol can play the Red River Jig the way they play it in Amachewespimawinihk (Stanley Mission).

Sol plays the Red River Jig.

John: Where did you learn that version of the of the Red River Jig?

Solomon: My dad. He could really play it with style. And that's how I learned it.

John: Well, I think you're a great fiddle player.

Solomon: Now I'm going to play a tune I learned from my dad.

Sol plays Devil's Dream.

John: Do you usually tune the fiddle differently for that tune?

Solomon: Not me.

John: Did you ever play any tunes in the tuning I showed you yesterday (A-E-A-C#)?

Solomon: I can only play a couple.

John: Okay, I'm going to pause the tape and get Sol to play crossed tuned.

Sol answers phone.

John: Okay, Sol's going to play something in C# tuning.

Sol plays Black Mountain Rag.

Sol answers phone.

John: Do you have another one?

Solomon: Can't remember. (laughter)

Starts playing reel like Flop Eared Mule.

John: Duck Dance?

Solomon: Yes.

Sol plays Duck Dance and a reel.

Solomon: This was a French song that I heard on the radio a couple of times back in 1957.

John: And you don't know the name?

Solomon: They were speaking French on the radio so I don't know the name.

John: How many tunes to you think you know?

Solomon: I used to play over a thousand tunes. If I practice I could play over 500 tunes.

John: Tell me about your first fiddle.

Solomon: I used to steal my dad's fiddle. (laughter).

John: Where did you get your fiddles back then?

Solomon: The Pas. I ordered this violin from a Hudson's Bay catalogue from Winnipeg. That's how I got my first violin when I was 17 or 18. I couldn't play all the time because I had to work. And if you didn't work, you got the friendly slap! (laughter). So I had to do the work on the side.

John: So the work kind of cuts into your fiddling time.

Solomon: Yes.

John: If you broke strings what did you do?

Solomon: You had to order them the same way as the violin, and it took about two weeks.

John: If you needed piko (rosin) where did you get it? Did you make your own?

Solomon: You can get spruce gum anywhere here.

John: Did you boil it?

Solomon: No, it came in all shapes and sizes.

John: Was it pretty good?

Solomon: It's better than the factory made.

John: What's the best kind of spruce gum to get?

Solomon: The dark stuff is best.

John: Did you do anything to customize your fiddle? Some people carved stuff on it or some people had a tassel.

Solomon: They raised and lowered the bridge to adjust the action. I used to make the bridge from a moose shoulder blade.

John: What's the Cree word for the bridge? Is it "Little Horse?"

Solomon: Yes, Mistatimis, Little Horse.

John: Sometimes people would put something inside their fiddle. People down south would put a rattlesnake tail inside. Sometimes people would put a bear tooth in their fiddle. Did you ever hear of anything like that?

Solomon: No.

John: When you were growing up were there a lot of people playing back then?

Solomon: There were lots of fiddle players.

John: Did anyone else in your family play fiddle?

Solomon: My sister Maggie. She can still play. She was better than me. But she's still got it.

John: Tell me about the dances here. What time did they start and what time did they finish?

Solomon: They used to dance during the day. They would start around suppertime and play all night.

John: Did they have guitars a long time ago?

Solomon: In the old days they didn't use guitars, only recently.

John: But they always kept time with their feet?

Solomon: Yes.

John: When they played back then, most of the people wore moccasins, but when the fiddle players played, did they wear hard shoes to keep time?

Solomon: Yes. When they used to play we used wooden shoes.

John: Did the dancers wear hard shoes when they danced or jigged?

Solomon: Some were using store bought shoes and some were using moccasins.

John: Did they always dance the Red River Jig here as far as you can remember?

Solomon: Yes, the women used to make a circle.

John: Do you ever remember the Red River Jig danced as a competition between two people?

Solomon: Yes.

John: The one who ran out of the fancy changes was the one who lost?

Solomon: Yes. When they jigged it's not like now. They were good at it.

John: Do you remember any of the old steps?

Solomon: I can't describe them. They were fast.

John: If there were two people challenging each other and they were tied, how did they resolve that? Some places they used to put a saucer on their head with a glass of wine in it, and the last one to spill the wine was the winner. When they would dance they wouldn't move, it was all in the feet.

Solomon: Yes, we did the same thing here if they couldn't decide the winner.

John: So there wasn't a lot of jumping around?

Solomon: No.

John: I think that's about it for the interview. I think we've pretty much covered everything. So I'm going to shut off the machine and play some tunes. Is there anything you'd like to add about fiddle playing or dancing or anything you can think of?

Solomon: I have to put one more tune on the tape. This is a square dance tune. One of my favourites.

Sol plays a Don Messer style reel.

John: One more question I have for you. If you were going to say something to a young person today who wanted to learn fiddle, what would you tell them?

Solomon: I would tell them to start slow and keep playing the tune over and over again until you're good at it.

John: Ekosi anima. Tenehki.

Solomon: Ekosi?

John: Ekosi.