

## The Métis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference

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Saskatoon

Day 2, Laliberte Sessions (A)

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**Heather Devine:** Next thing I'll talk about is serial marriages. Now, a lot of us have been quoting R.K. Thomas' essay in *The New Peoples*, which is a really great essay. One of the things he talks about is what has come up before, about markers, cultural markers, and he says, quote, "The first has to do with the content, the 'what' of the 'we,' that which anthropologists generally call culture. The second concerns the more abstract dimension of collective identity, the question of nationality, that sense of common origin and common destiny felt even by strangers who live many miles apart." Now, how do the Métis people, who are scattered over thousands of miles in hundreds of communities retain that sense of common origin and destiny that's so essential to nationhood, without having that sovereign territory, which is also considered a hallmark of nationhood? Well, first of all I would say that the reality, rather than merely the sense of common origin, has a great deal to do with it.

It is not uncommon for modern Métis people to find distant blood relatives in almost any western Canadian community with fur trade origins, be they Indian or non-Indian. I'm related to at least three of the other conference presenters here by blood. Now, Métis people take that for granted, but it is not common. If you go to other conferences, chances are you're not going to be related to people there. But this is really common in the Métis community. I've gone into libraries where I've sat down, in Manitoba, you know, and the guy next to me says, "Well, what are you researching?" I give a family name—"Oh, they're our grandparents, too, oh yeah, so we're related to those." This is really, really common, and as somebody said, "We're all related." Well, don't denigrate that blood is thicker than water. There's a reason people say that, and it's a really important

component of feeling that sort of mano-a-mano feeling you feel with other Métis. It's important. You know, it is important, I believe that. We are all related and we can thank our ancestors' marital practices for that.

Now, now as I mentioned, the French and the Scots, who by and large were the progenitors of large Métis communities, they believed in family unity. They believed in family endeavours. They were really clannish people. They were a lot like Aboriginal people. I always have the sense the Scots, some of the Highlanders, knew exactly where Native groups were coming from because they were like that themselves. And they married amongst themselves. Business and family life was all the same. You hired your relatives. You married your female cousins if you were allowed to by the church. But once these traders get into the upper country, they start combining their own Euro-Canadian marital practices with the Aboriginal ones, and they did things like arrange to have protectors for their families if they were going home on furlough for any reason. And that meant that they also assume that that person would be the husband and father while they were gone.

And I've studied the genealogical records of a lot of Freemen, and I've also been in communication with many people who do genealogy on their families. And the earlier you go back, or the farther you go back into the very roots of these communities, the more complex it becomes. We realize that they had really flexible, maybe even liberal ideas about marriage. We know that Freemen sometimes had two wives at the same time, or they married sisters, which was an Aboriginal practice. Some of our records suggest that some Freemen would end one country union, take up another relationship with another woman, then go back to the original woman. We know this because we can track the births through scrip affidavits. We also know that sometimes a hunter would break off relations with one woman and then we'd discover that his pal, his hunting companion, takes the same woman as a wife later on, and we know this because we can read the fur trade records, post records that refer to groups of hunters, and we can look at scrip affidavits as well.

And sometimes, there's also a case that John Foster cites of the Freeman Jean Dumont. He turns off his Sarcee-Crow wife. He gives her to another Freeman, Paul Durand, to take as his wife. He goes to Lower Canada. He changes his mind and he comes back two or three years later, and he asks for her back. Well, Durand doesn't want to give her back, so basically he takes her back forcibly is what they say. So I guess probably Jean Durand underwent a hell of a beating. Anyway, Durand disappears from the records and Dumont carries on with his wife. So these kinds of things happened.

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