

Michelle Delorme—Parks Canada Interview, February 7, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): This is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Michelle Delorme for the Grasslands National Park project, specifically relating to Fort Battleford and some of the related Métis communities such as Cochin. Hello Michelle, how are you?

Michelle Delorme (MD): I'm fine, Thank you.

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

MD: My Name is Michelle Janet Isabelle Delorme. I'm originally from Cochin, Saskatchewan.

DP: Who were/are your parents and grandparents?

MD: My mother and father are David and Yvette Delorme. Are you talking grandparents on both my parents' side, like my Mom and Dad's side?

DP: Yes.

MD: Okay, my mother's side, my grandparent were Christine and Leo Delaire, and on my Dad's side, they were Margaret and George Delorme, but my grandmother's maiden name was Laplante, Margaret Laplante.

DP: Laplante, and your father's side is where the Métis is, and your mother is francophone?

MD: Yes, it is my father's side.

DP: Now, they're originally from Cochin, you said earlier when we talked on the phone that you have roots in Willow Bunch, is that correct?

MD: I don't know off hand, I remember talking to my Dad about it, just kind of a spur of the moment thing we talked about. I think my understanding is my grandfather came from Willow Bunch. I don't know if he was young when he came over or if he was older. My Dad wasn't born yet, my Dad's the baby of the family. Dad said they came from Willow Bunch and settled in Cochin. Then he married grandma in Cochin area, 'cause Laplantes originally are from Cochin, they lived in Moosomin Reserve, but, as far as I know they were from there.

DP: Okay. Now you mentioned French and Michif, your family members did speak?

MD: Yes, I have some aunties and uncles on my Dad's side that speak Michif.

DP: The mix of French and Cree, that Michif? They still speak it?

MD: Yes! Usually amongst each other, because a lot of my relatives, my generation, we don't speak Michif at all. I don't think I have any cousins that speak Michif, but I have aunties and uncles that do, and they talk amongst each other, they'll sometimes talk Michif, or if they need an elder or whoever who ends up speaking Michif, they'll talk back that language.

DP: Okay. Did anyone in your family serve in the military, like a grandfather in World War One or World War Two that you can recall?

MD: I don't even know, I don't think so. I'm not sure if I had any or not.

DP: Okay, how were the Métis treated in Cochin? Cochin is largely a Métis/First Nations community right?

MD: Well, yeah. Cochin is kind of situated right in the middle, on each side there is two reserves: the Saulteaux Reserve, and then we have Moosomin Reserve. So, Cochin is right in the middle of it, and we are a big. When I was growing up, we had a lot of Métis. Now my generation, most of us are gone, moved away and had kids or whatever sort of thing, so as far as know they still have the Métis community, I just don't really know anymore what they do with it. I've never really inquired, because I'm not too sure whose really all left there. My uncles and aunties are, but their kids are ... we're pretty much scattered all over the place.

DP: Okay. What are some of the other Métis families that you remember around Cochin?

MD: Gosh! The only ones I know for sure were my Delormes, Caplettes, Poitras, and Ness. Yep, they're Métis too. Baker? No I don't think Bakers are Métis. Those are the main ones I can think of that were there that I knew were Métis.

DP: Did the people around Cochin, were there any instances where the Métis people encountered any racism or were discriminated against?

MD: I don't remember a lot from my childhood, certain things trigger things back, but, no. I found that living in Cochin; it was a pretty close community. Like when something happened everybody kind of got together and helped deal with it; however, you needed to, I don't recall any racism at all. Because I was young, my Dad was the baby, so I don't remember a lot. Maybe my older relatives might, like my older cousins might remember that, but off-hand, I don't remember really any of that. 'Cause small towns though, everybody knew everybody, you couldn't get away with nothing, 'cause everybody knew your parents and they'd be telling on you right away.

DP: The Métis got along with the First Nations, generally good relations?

MD: I would say, because we were related to a lot of them. Like my side of the family, Delormes, are related to a lot of people from Moosomin. So we're all related one way or another to them, Saulteaux not too much, we weren't related to Saulteaux, but we got along with them I found. 'Cause I played sports with both reserves, played on their teams, stuff like that. We had relatives that

did that, we partied with them, we did different kinds of things with them, and so I thought it was alright.

DP: Okay. Do you know any traditional Métis stories, none of the old songs?

MD: No. No, I was never really, growing up my Dad. My grandparents both passed away, like my Dad was 7 or 8 when both his parents passed away, and then my two aunties, my Dad's two older sisters, had to raise him, and so they weren't raised the Métis way. Like my Dad didn't have any of that, so it was never put with us, like me and my siblings. We learned the Catholic way, because my mother's Catholic. Well, my Dad is too, but we were raised the Catholic way, we weren't really raised the Métis way, we never learned any of that stuff...

DP: You didn't... Like living off the land, harvesting resources?

MD: Nope. Well, my Dad hunts. But no, no we never did farming, not at all. My father worked with Battleford Provincial Park for years, and my mother was working in around Cochin, then she was working in North Battleford, stuff like that. Other than hunting, fishing, like all of that. Trapping, whatever, my Dad did that, and I have uncles and them that end up doing that too. They still to this day, I have some uncles that still I think do the trapping, and my Dad, a lot of them do the hunting, they love the hunting still.

DP: Okay, and collecting berries and all that sort of thing?

MD: My mother and Dad actually do that.

DP: To this day?

MD: Yep. Actually, every summer they go out. I was talking to them during the summer time, I talked to my parents, and Mom had said that they were going to go pick some berries, because my Mom cans, eh? She makes chokecherry jam, and she makes the raspberry jam, and she makes pickles, and the fruits, and all that. Yep, my Mom does that.

DP: Okay. Did you ever hear stories about your family members using traditional medicines?

MD: No, I don't ever recall that when I was growing up, I would have no idea with that. My older relatives, they might have heard a lot of this stuff, but, 'cause like I say my Dad was the baby and, oh my gosh, my Dad has, I don't even know 7, 8, 9 brothers, and there was about 3 or 4 sisters, and my Dad's the baby. So a lot of that stuff, we never grew up with. Like the older generation, my older cousins, probably a lot of them would have experienced it. I haven't.

DP: Okay. Your family owned land, so you weren't like road allowance people, so that...

MD: No we, growing up, we rented. We rented for years, and then finally, I can even remember when, I think I was still young then, when my parents were able to buy their land, and now my parents own the land that they live on, with their house.

DP: Okay, did anyone in your family make beaded or embroidered moccasins or other items?

MD: No, the only thing I've done in the past, well, my sister's done the earring thing, you know, with the little thing-a-ma-jig there, but not really the beading. I worked with the City of Saskatoon doing summer jobs. I worked with beads, like the pony beads, and stuff like that, not the really the teeny ones. If you want to make like necklaces, or rings, or those bracelets, that's all I've ever done with the teeny beads. Yeah, and then the bigger beads, key chains, gosh, I guess whatever else you could make. But, other than that, no I've never done anything like that.

DP: Okay. Did your family celebrate special holidays and events like Christmas, Easter, or New Years in a traditional Métis fashion? You said Catholic...

MD: Well, like, Christmas is a big-time holiday for my family. We all get together and stuff like that, but what do you mean Métis, like foods and all that?

DP: Yeah, the foods, and then where you'd have like a long period of Lent, and things would start to get festive, like with fiddle playing.

MD: Well, like I say at Christmas time we all try to get together, and then we go to church. We don't have the bannock or whatever kind of food, like we don't normally do that. We have the turkey and all the traditional things. Lent, yes we do follow Lent. My mother is very religious, so that was instilled in us since we were young; we were in church every Sunday with my Mom. I do Lent, that's one thing strongly believe in, I still follow my Lent, and working in the Catholic system, where we go to church and we do all that kind of stuff too.

DP: So you'd have like a party after midnight mass for Christmas, that sort of thing?

MD: Oh, I'm trying to remember that far back. I don't ever remember having anything after midnight mass, we'd be in bed. I know some people have the meal right after. We don't, I don't ever remember us doing that.

DP: Okay, was anyone in your family involved with the Métis Society/Métis Nation?

MD: No.

DP: Do you ever recall hearing anything about you family member s being connected to Fort Battleford in any way?

MD: No, I've never heard anything about that. I don't even really know much about Fort Battleford, I've heard about it and things like that.

DP: Okay, the questions relate to Métis involvement in these historic sites. Fort Battleford was a North West Mounted Police fort, and they employed a lot of Métis people as guides, and scouts, and that sort of thing so that's why I asked that question.

MD: Oh, Okay.

DP: So you don't know if your family had any involvement with Fort Battleford?

MD: I've never, ever heard any uncles or anybody. Mind you, I've never asked, but I've never heard any of my relatives ever talk about Fort Battleford. As far as I know, from growing up, all of my uncles and aunties, some lived in Cochin, some lived in North Battleford, and they did whatever jobs they did, and I've never heard them mention anything about Fort Battleford.

DP: Okay. Was anyone in your family involved in the 1885 Resistance?

MD: No, not that I know of.

DP: No. So they weren't involved in 1885?

MD: Nope, again I've never heard anybody talk about it.

DP: Okay. If you had to guess, about how long has your family been in the Cochin area, about 80 years? 90 years? Somewhere along those lines?

MD: Oh, I would probably say yes, around there for sure. It's been quite a few decades.

DP: Okay. What sort of relationship did the Métis have with; well I guess you would think of them as the RCMP, but I'm asking this in a historic sense. The question is related to the mounted police, like when they still rode horses, so you might not know the answer, but I'll ask anyway. What sort of relationship did the Métis have with the Mounted Police at Cochin, do you know?

MD: Yeah, I wouldn't know. By the time I was born, we had the police in the cars already.

DP: So they were already the RCMP, and not the North West...

MD: ...By the time I was born, yes.

DP: Oh yeah, Okay. Did any of your ancestors ever work for the Mounted Police, like did you ever hear stories of them as scouts or guides?

MD: No! I don't have any relatives that ever worked with the RCMP.

DP: Okay. Do you know if your ancestors took Métis Scrip, at Fort Battleford or anywhere else?

MD: I have no idea, I couldn't even tell you about that neither. Again, nobody has ever mentioned anything like that.

DP: Okay. So you're familiar with Métis Scrip, what that was?

MD: I think it was something to do with lands.

DP: Yep, it was just a means the government used to extinguish the Métis and other Aboriginals' title to the land. They'd give a person a certificate of paper that gave them either money or land. The system was kind of fraudulent. If you had to think of things that could make Fort. Battleford and

the other Parks Canada sites more Métis friendly, what could you think of? Like obviously you're involved in education, so you think education, like the interpretation?

MD: Well, I find that, especially because I work in the education field, a lot of people don't even know what Métis are, it's unbelievable. Like I work in elementary. We have 450 kids in my school, so we always have a multicultural day every year, and everybody with different nationalities, we do our own thing, you know, whatever we do. So there's times, like there's been that last few years, I've worn my Métis sash, I have a Métis necklace, my bracelet. Like I wear this stuff all year round, and I have kids who are like "Well, Mrs. Delorme, what's that?" And I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" Some people don't even know what Métis are, and I have to explain, they don't even know that it's a non-First Nation with a First Nation making Métis. It just amazes me; I just can't believe how some of the kids don't know what Métis are. Or they clump Métis and First Nations together, they go, "Miss Delorme, you're an Indian," and I say "uh, no. Number 1, I don't like that term Indian, it's called First Nations. Number 2, no, I'm an aboriginal." There's a difference between First Nations and Métis. So definitely, I'd say education, that's one thing I think, people need to know the difference between us two, because we are different.

DP: Do you find it, in the media, that it's really frustrating that they mix the two groups together?

MD: Well, yeah. It seems like they just clump us together, they just say Aboriginal, and then you know it's just kind of... They'll put First Nations, Métis and Inuit, like Inuit's included with us, as an Aboriginal, mind you there's not a whole lot of Inuit I don't think really around here. But, you hear something happen and they say Aboriginal and you're like "Okay, well, is that First Nations? Is that Métis?" We don't know. Whatever, can't do much about it, they're going to do what they want to do. It's just the way it is.

DP: So you think just increased interpretation, and working with cultural people and that sort of thing... Would be a good way to make these sites more Métis friendly, and to educate non-Métis people?

MD: Yes! 'Cause I think like, living in Canada and especially in Saskatchewan, like, in Saskatchewan alone there's a lot of Aboriginal people. So, you've got all these other people coming in; you've got immigrants from all over coming in, and then you got your non-First Nations, and nobody knows anything about us. I'm thinking to myself, "The First Nations were the first people here, it's their land, and nobody seems to know!" You know what I mean? You tell the kids, and they're like, "Well, what do you mean?" And it's like, "Oh god, you don't even know the history behind it?"

DP: No. In fact, we're working—the Gabriel Dumont Institute—we're working to produce a resource for New Canadians to better understand Métis history and Culture, and it's going to be handed out and distributed to New Canadians when they come. So, that'll help educate people. What sort of community groups or specific people do you think should be involved with the interpretation of Métis history? Like, you think just working with elders, and community people, and institutions like GDI would be the way to go?

MD: Okay, can you explain that again?

DP: For Parks Canada, what sort of Métis groups or individuals do you think should work with them to help with the interpretation of Métis history and culture? Are there any specific resource people, or Métis agencies you'd recommend?

MD: I would think probably Batoche, because they're the main kind of the Métis as far as I'm concerned, so I think they would be one that should be kind of right in there too, helping out with whatever resources or whatever you need. I guess the Métis Society, whoever's in charge of that, like a lot of them know exactly what's going on and stuff like that, I would think probably yeah those ones whoever's in there for that, and then maybe, sometimes I think talking to people, you know Métis people, randomly, and just kind of ask them their opinion, kind of like surveys. I get a lot of phone calls all the time for surveys, and it doesn't really pertain to me, like oh my God that, just before the election, just about every week I had someone phoning me, "Are you going to vote PC? Are you gonna vote..." You know what I mean? Like what a pain... but to me, like I'm thinking for this to do with the Métis, if maybe you could phone up some of the Métis? Or on the street, or send out surveys or whatever, like sometimes get their opinions too, that always helps.

DP: Okay. So more community consultation, you'd strongly recommend that?

MD: I think so, 'cause myself personally, I think it's the voice of the people, that's what you need to ask. Because like, say as a Métis, sometimes I find that we're in the middle. It's kind of hard because sometimes you feel like, "Oh, my white side doesn't want me," but then sometime its "Well, my native side doesn't want me." So I'm kind of stuck in the middle sometime, I don't know, sometimes a person just gets that feeling, and sometimes it's nice to ask a person of Métis, you know, what things would you recommend, what things would you like to see happen or change or whatever?

DP: Okay. I forgot to ask you one question Michelle, as a Métis person who grew up around Cochin, what places around there, what landscapes, do you think are really important and should be preserved? Are there any Métis-specific places you could remember?

MD: No. There was nothing Métis-wise. The only thing growing up we had, I remember we had lived by this big hill, when I was just young in Cochin. I don't know if you've ever been to Cochin?

DP: No.

MD: Well there's a big hill, and on top now they have a lighthouse on it.

DP: Oh, yeah, a lighthouse.

MD: We have a lighthouse now on the hill that, when I was young, we used to kind of play on there. But Métis-wise, there's nothing really Métis there, like I say other than the big hill I used to play on, and you know the sports you were involved. Every night a bunch of us would be getting together in the wintertime playing hockey, shinny, skating, broomball, we'd all meet in this one, 'cause it was an

older rink we had, wed all meet in the big warm place, put on our skates, chitchat in there, like socializing.

DP: Okay.

MD: I have to say, especially for myself, we do a lot of socializing as Métis, like I found that out. We got together. Like Christmas Day, my Dad we would have our Christmas thing, and then we'd go to all my uncles and aunties and we'd go visit, go and have pop or tea, or we'd eat again.

DP: Okay.

MD: So we did that, it was a tradition for us. I don't know if I'd say its Métis, but it was a tradition when I was growing up. And it was all Delormes. We'd go to our relatives, and then we actually went to some of the other people that weren't Métis in the community, and visit.

DP: Okay, well that's a Métis tradition to do that, it used to be more so New Years, but I think those holidays have kind of merged.

MD: Really? I just remembered, again I don't want to say this is a Métis tradition, but all of my uncles and my Dad and then our families would all go and chop and haul wood, and then we'd all go and take turns dropping off to each uncle, and then my Dad would get his ladder. We'd all do that together, that was a big thing we did in the fall. That was a get together for us, we did that every year when I was growing up. Because we had a wood-burning stove? We didn't have the heat like we have here living in the city, we didn't grow up with that. So I grew up with the wood-burning stove, so for myself I'd say that was a tradition.

DP: I would think that's a Métis tradition, particularly thinking of family members, and chopping and hauling wood, I think that was common in places where there was lots of bush for sure.

MD: Yeah, 'cause I think we used to go up to Moosomin? And we would get the dead trees or you know whatever from there. Because were related to the chief, usually whatever chiefs were in we were related to, so we'd just go and ask if we could take them, and he would say, "No problem, then we'd just go and take 'em and bring 'em down."

DP: Okay and that was something the family all did together?

MD: Yep, it was every fall we had to do that, it was always, like I say my uncles and some of their kids, and then my Dad and usually me. My siblings were a little younger than I was, so I was usually the one to go and help.

DP: Okay. Are there any other thoughts, or other things you can think of that you think are important that you could remember about growing up Métis, or being a Métis woman from Cochin? Anything you can think of that you think is important?

MD: I would probably, for me it's just that I've come into my Métis roots later. I'm a lot stronger Métis now than I was growing up. My Dad wasn't really raised Métis because my grandparents

passed away, and my aunties didn't know, so it wasn't instilled in my Dad, and then my Dad didn't instill it in us. Within the last few years, I've been really getting in to my Métis heritage, trying to learn more about it and stuff like that, it took me awhile to get into it, to sort this thing out because I wasn't raised that way. People go, "Well you're Métis," and I'm like, "Yeah, but I wasn't raised that way."

DP: Okay.

MD: So it's hard, like for me. It took me a while, and now I'm starting to try and learn the Métis way. Like learn things that I should have known already, but like I say you know when upbringings are different?

DP: Yeah. Well and remember a lot of Métis people had to hide their identity, 'cause it was just easier to try to fit in. You're pretty much where I would say probably half of Métis people are now, just trying to find out who they are, and finding out about their families, and their cultures, and languages, so you share this experience with a lot of people. Very few people I've met have lived a traditional Métis life, can speak a Métis language, and know all the stories. Those are very rare people. Unfortunately, a lot of people had to assimilate. A lot of people, because of the racism, forced themselves to assimilate, marry non-aboriginal people, and then the heritage got diluted, and now the kids, and grandkids, and great-grandkids are trying to figure out who the heck they are, you know?

MD: Yeah.

DP: So your experience is pretty common with many, many, people, and I guess it's just sort of what you're comfortable with, and how you're comfortable with your identity, 'cause each Métis person has a slightly different sense of who a Métis is, you now? You won't meet two Métis people that agree on what makes Métis history and culture, and that sort of thing.

MD: Considering too now, I just found this out probably within the last maybe year, I didn't know that now we have the red flag?

DP: Yeah.

MD: Infinity flag, like see, I'm French so I'm the blue. I've got a coworker who came from Manitoba, and she was talking about that and I was, "Like what?! When did this come in? I didn't even know about that!"

DP: Well they both came from the 1815-1816, they're both pretty old. They were both from the North West Company, the Métis flew them, and then the flag was forgotten about for a long time, and it was revived in the 1970s by the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan. Now it's become the universally accepted Métis flag, but the blue flag is much more common here in Saskatchewan. Alberta likes the red one.

MD: Oh?!

DP: But they both have the origins from the same point in history: Both are pretty old, both gone for a long, long time, and then both revived in the 1970s.

MD: Okay.

DP: So that's sort of in a nutshell where the flag came from.

MD: Oh yeah, okay.

DP: But, yeah, there's always interesting things you learn working in the Métis field, you learn something new and interesting every day, I never stop learning at this job.

MD: Oh yeah, well that's like I say, the education field. "Like, every day they say is a new learning experience." I'm just like, trying to remember back when I was young, and I'm like, "Oh my God, I don't even remember that, You know? But that just the way life seems to be.

DP: Is there anything else you'd like to share Michelle?

MD: No. I don't think so.

DP: Well, I thank you ever so much for your time ...

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