

Doris O'Reilly—Parks Canada Interview, February 1, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): Okay. It's February 1, 2012 and this is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Doris O'Reilly of Willow Bunch for the Parks Canada Grasslands National Park partnership. How are you this morning Doris?

Doris O'Reilly (DO): I'm fine. How are you?

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

DO: My name is Doris O'Reilly, and my home community is Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan.

DP: And I understand from talking to you before Doris, that you're not Métis yourself but you've lived in Willow Bunch your whole life.

DO: That's correct.

DP: In terms of Métis history and culture in Willow Bunch and south-western Saskatchewan in general what kinds of things would you like to see?

DO: Since I'm president of the museum in Willow Bunch I would like to see a better display and more history on our Métis because they really are our forefathers. They were the first ones to settle in this area. And, I find that is lacking in our museum you know, we don't have a lot of the history. And, we need to update it, we have a room dedicated to First Nations and the Métis, but we don't have a lot of artefacts and stuff to put in there.

DP: Okay so would you be looking for broader partnerships perhaps?

DO: If that were possible. That was something that was brought to my attention like with a Métis person that came, and was doing some historical research or whatever. And I kind of mentioned that we had a number of pictures that were just like, posted on the wall, and I thought it would be better to do something like we have in our archives, seeing that these are our pioneers, true pioneers. And, have good photo frames and do a better display and then be able to get some information put in with those pictures.

DP: Okay. Being a lifelong resident of Willow Bunch could you tell me from what you remember, how the Métis lived in Willow Bunch and how they made a living?

DO: Yeah, I was younger then. Some of them were trying farming like you know? Some of them were farmer or ranchers, and then in my particular memories, I can remember my dad hiring them because in those days there was a lot of what we called hired men.

DP: Yes.

DO: To help out, because there was a lot more manual labour. And, there was some very good workers. And, my memories are that they were polite, you know? But not everyone was cut out to be farmers or ranchers, and some of them, I think, they preferred hunting and trapping and so we lost some of those people to northern Saskatchewan.

DP: Okay.

DO: Where they could continue their way of life.

DP: Okay. So you remember Métis being a lot of farm hands and living on the land, hunting and trapping?

DO: Mhmm.

DP: When did most of the Métis move out of Willow Bunch? Now a lot of Métis have come back and a lot of Métis who hid their identity have reclaimed their Métis identity, but a lot of Métis did move away like you said, to the north and other places. Was that mainly in the '40s and '50s or?

DO: Yeah, in the '40s or '50s, yeah.

DP: Okay.

DO: Yeah, we had, there was a farm, a Métis farm, the cooperative farm, and I remember that folding up and like you say, they moved probably in the '50s, late '50s or something like that.

DP: Okay, in terms of how the Métis fit into society in Willow Bunch in the southwest in general, do you think they faced discrimination? Do you think they tried their best to get along? Or, do you think there was some instances where there were some injustices? Or, do you think overall for the most part all people just tried to make their way in the world?

DO: Well okay, all people tried to make their way. There was discrimination, I'm sure there was. You know I can remember tidbits of conversation where at one point I went to a country school, but came into Willow Bunch for the winter months when it was fall to take my catechism and going to speak to a neighbour girl you know? I knew from our neighbourhood out in the country and then someone telling me "did you know she was Métis?"

DP: Okay.

DO: And yeah, so there was that distinction done by some people. I don't say all people but by some.

DP: Okay.

DO: Yeah.

DP: Was there a sense back then, and like I say back then when you were a younger person, that the Métis were the first settlers I guess of the Willow Bunch area? Like was there an understanding that they had helped establish the community?

DO: No.

DP: Or do you think it was largely Jean-Louis Légaré, and the focus was on his efforts?

DO: When I was younger, there actually probably would have been no reference to that, of them being our first settlers. It's only when I got older and started going into history and getting involved with the museum that I realized how little we knew about our first settlers.

DP: Do you think as well in Willow Bunch, in particular, a lot of people had a mixed identity? Like a lot of people could have been Métis or French Canadian because the families had intermarried so much. That was quite common in Willow Bunch?

DO: Yeah there was, yeah it was. There's, you know, a good mixture of both cultures, and yeah there was intermarriage.

DP: Okay. When, from what you could remember who were some of the Métis families that lived in Willow Bunch? That may not live there anymore, I am sorry to put you on the spot but I'm ...

DO: Oh my. Well there would be a lot of like, there would be like McGillis, Lacertes [two pronunciations], however you pronounce it. St. Denis; there's lots more. You're catching me off guard because I have to go back and think of the names. You know I have to go back and think of the names because a lot of the time I don't relate to them as being Métis.

DP: Or just ...

DO: Or community.

DP: Just people.

DO: Like Caplettes.

DP: Caplettes.

DO: Yeah. Lapointes.

DP: Lapointes.

DO: I guess Lesperance.

DP: Lesperance, and some of these families were both Métis and French Canadian.

DO: Yeah and like the, I think maybe some of them had, there were a few that had a Scottish background with the Métis you know?

DP: Okay.

DO: There wasn't only the French that were intermarried with the Métis.

DP: Okay now you mentioned Lacertes, that's who the co-op was named after correct? The Métis farm?

DO: Yes, yeah.

DP: And when did the Métis farm stop operating? Was that in the '50s?

DO: It would be in the '50s yeah.

DP: What eventually happened? The land just got sold off?

DO: Sold off yeah, I think now ... the land at one time belonged to Durands. Yeah, somebody, people bought it.

DP: Bought it up.

DO: And it kind of, yeah, sadly it disappeared.

DP: Did the Métis, when they interacted with the larger community in Willow Bunch, did they generally speak French or did they speak English?

DO: In those days, it was mostly French.

DP: Almost all in French?

DO: Yeah.

DP: Amongst themselves they would have spoke Michif probably you think?

DO: Probably, and I'm not aware of it because I wouldn't have been amongst them when you know, it would have been within their groups, I don't know. They spoke English, like they were able. They probably had a handle of more languages than I did. Like you say, they could speak the Michif, and French and English.

DP: Okay, now who were some of the elders, do you remember? You mentioned McGillis. He, I forget his name, but he was one of the elders in the community, is that correct?

DO: Geordy [Georges] McGillis. Yeah, I remember him especially, very hard working man. Both he and [Marie] Alphee [Lacerte] his wife, and like, there's still one of the son's living here in Willow Bunch, Danny.

DP: And his name was Geordy?

DO: Geordy, yep.

DP: Okay. And he was one of the, the, the elders in the community? Were there any other Métis elders you remember or recall?

DO: I'm trying to, I see a man, but I'm trying to think of what the name would have been. Maybe it was another McGillis, like there was Robert, an older—

DP: Okay.

DO: Well the Lacertes. I remember, like there was Louis Lacerte that I remember. And the other brother Damase.

DP: Okay.

DO: And there would be another one. Like there were other Lacertes, but they left, they went north, some were in the army and, but I remember them.

DP: Okay.

DO: Lapointes would have been another one I suppose.

DP: Okay. In the way that people lived, a lot of ways, there were a lot of commonalities, like say for instance everyone was pretty much Catholic. When, when there were things like midnight mass and, and Christmas time and everything, everybody got together in the community and did all that together?

DO: Yes—

DP: Métis, Francophones?

DO:—they would come to church. Yeah, everybody went to church. Christmas and Easter were special occasions.

DP: Okay, so what sorts of things do you remember? Like people getting all dressed up and going to midnight mass and, and that sort of thing?

DO: Yeah, and I don't remember, but I was told by a lady that the Métis on Sundays after mass in the afternoons would gather on the South Hill side, and they would have what she called a "jam session." They would get together and someone would play the fiddle, and they would be singing. And she said, and I lived in the country so I wasn't aware of this, this was in Willow Bunch, and she said they would sing. And she said people would go out on their door steps and just listen to them because you could be entertained by beautiful music and songs, and that's something I missed out on. I wish I would have known of, you know? They were, the Métis would have a very good sense of getting together as a community and

just enjoying themselves, but also they were sharing it because they would do this out in the open for everybody to hear.

DP: That's the one thing people always commented upon about the Métis down in Willow Bunch, they were very musical.

DO: This one lady told me because she was brought up here you know? And she was telling me about this. So I'm giving you second-hand information but it's something that was brought to my attention when I was at the museum, you know how people would get together? And she referred to it as the "People of the Hamlet." They were on the south-side of town.

DP: The Métis hamlet.

DO: Yeah.

DP: How long did people live in the Hamlet? Like were, in the '50s and '60s again people started to move away from it or was that before then?

DO: Probably until the early 50s.

DP: So PFRA came in and moved people or?

DO: Pardon me?

DP: The Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act was that involved? Like when you know, people were moved off the land?

DO: I can't comment on that because I'm not sure.

DP: Not sure.

DO: No.

DP: But generally in the '50s people started to move away. In terms of country dances and that in Willow Bunch, did everybody participate? Like Métis play music and Francophones, was that all kind of shared or just depends on who the best fiddle players and that sort of thing were?

DO: Again, I really don't know. I don't know you know?

DP: Okay, okay. In terms of what you can remember about the old Métis way of life in Willow Bunch, what impressions do you have that are lasting? That you can remember when you were a younger person?

DO: Their way of life?

DP: Yeah like what stands out.

DO: Well, when I think about it: very hard workers, and they could make do with a lot less and they had a happy life.

DP: They were happy.

DO: They were, yeah, you know? They would go work as a farm labourer or the women would go and help doing house cleaning or whatever for other people and they were never scared of work.

DP: No.

DO: They were, you know hard workers.

DP: And they had a strong sense of community.

DO: I think so. You know when you think back and look at it, they did because they stayed here and they just kept working hard. And things weren't easy for them because they were thrust into a different kind of lifestyle, which they gave their best I'm sure. Being a younger, you know I was younger at the time, but that's the kind of recollections I get.

DP: In terms of what you would like to see Parks Canada do at Grasslands—which is close to Willow Bunch—what sorts of things would you like to see them do in terms of promoting Métis history and culture?

DO: Like maybe set up a place where you would be able to see like if they built sod houses or when they came here exactly how they, how they managed to exist because there wasn't much for them to get started with other than the sod and the trees that were here. It would be nice to see exactly how they got started to let the next generations know. And that's what's being lost is that we didn't get that down on paper or, that people will remember.

DP: So you think just trying to educate people about the Métis and their role in the region? All the different things they did. Do you say there's a role for your museum and your community to help Parks Canada try to better educate about Métis history and culture in the region? Like would you like to, if possible, be involved with them in some of this interpretation, or to have Métis community members work with the museum and Grasslands?

DO: It would be nice to have a connection yeah. To have somebody that would like to become a part of the, you know, committee with our museum and so they could instruct us and give us information so we could do something better with our interpretations too.

DP: Have you, this relates to what you do but not specifically to this project, but have you been in touch with the Métis, I guess it's not a museum but with the historical society in Willow Bunch or Wood Mountain rather?

DO: No I haven't.

DP: Because they are working on a lot of the same things you are. And of course, the Willow Bunch community, the Wood Mountain community were the same community.

DO: Yeah there's a close tie there.

DP: Yeah, Thelma Poirrier was working on a lot of these things. It might be interesting if you, when spring comes or whenever the two of you could discuss what's going on because they're doing some interesting things too. And Wood Mountain isn't all that far away, although you got those terrible roads.

DO: They've got a new road part way there.

DP: Well that makes it a little better but ...

DO: For you and it's called Métis historical?

DP: The Wood Mountain Historical Society. And they do a lot of real good work, now their focus is mainly on Lakota, like Sitting Bull's people but Métis did have a long presence at Wood Mountain. I mean it was originally a Métis settlement, and then of course all the Wood Mountain Métis moved to Willow Bunch. So they do some interesting work too. So maybe, maybe you guys, I'm not, to create work or tell you what to do but could think of a collaboration because that, I think that would be really neat.

DO: Okay yeah.

DP: Particularly the cowboying aspect because that's one thing the Métis in Willow Bunch were very good at. Very good cowboys.

DO: That's actually something I forgot about. Yes, you're right.

DP: So you would say that they were the best, in terms of their cowboyship, they were best, you know for that? Like they were the best cowboys in the area?

DO: They were good cowboys there yep. Now that you think of it, they'd have the rodeos too. There were two or three different places where they'd have rodeos, yeah you're right.

DP: Around Willow Bunch?

DO: Yeah like Peter Desautels would have rodeos and I gathered some of this information while we were working the history book. And the Rivards that was another Métis family.

DP: So Desautels and Rivards were Métis cowboys?

DO: And the Rivards, they'd have little rodeos at their place east of town too. So yeah, that would bring out the point where they did have good horsemanship.

DP: So the local farmers and ranchers definitely hired them for that purpose too?

DO: I presume, but that's a little bit before my time. It, you know, I was quite young, but I'm remembering some of the history that came up from doing the history book.

DP: Because it seems to me, from what I remember, ranching was really big until about the 1910s, '20s then farming took over right? And then by then everyone was pretty much a farmer around Willow Bunch?

DO: Yeah it started with ranching because there was so much grass here ,eh?

DP: Yeah same with Rockglen area too. Very similar.

DO: Yeah.

DP: And then from cowboys, eventually to ranch hands to you know, hired men and then, and then they kind of moved out of town after that period in the '40s and '50s.

DO: Yeah I suppose because machinery came out and there was not as much need for farm hands. That way of life ...

DP: It affected a lot of people, not just the Métis.

DO: Yes exactly. It was a way of life that happened for everybody.

DP: And farms got a lot bigger. were some of the Métis families that stayed in Willow Bunch? You mentioned McGillis, were there others that stayed long term?

DO: There was Lacertes.

DP: Lacertes.

DO: Oh man, you know I'm trying to think of the names here.

DP: So some of the other people in the area like the Desautels and the Lesperances.

DO: Yeah, yeah. The Desautel's and the Lesperances, of course. I think a lot of them, yeah.

DP: So a lot did stay, not everybody left, of course.

DO: Not everybody left no. There were different families of McGillis, and then there was, and I'm trying to think of the Rivards, but the Rivards pretty much all left too. St. Denis stayed for a longer time too. I'm thinking of somebody that I'm seeing people's faces, but I can't put names.

DP: No worries, no worries. Is there anything else you would like to share Doris?

DO: No, just like I said, just interested you know, to get the good history, the proper history. And make sure that it's not forgotten and people are given the proper perspective on what happened, how people's lives have changed and whatever you know? Like I say, that's

seriously lacking in our museum and now we're trying to get proper funding so we can do something about it. But, we need somebody, we need guidance.

DP: Okay, okay. So you definitely want more involvement with Métis individuals and community groups and that sort of thing?

DO: Yep, it would be beneficial.

DP: So maybe somewhere down the line GDI could come down and help you guys out?

DO: Anyone that could come and give us a hand would be nice.

...

DP: And in Grasslands they're bringing back all the bison and the ferrets and the...

DO: The native

DP: The grass that originally were here so I, I was sure, I went to Cypress Hills at the same time but I can honestly say that our grasslands were nicer, at least I thought so.

DO: I have yet to go to the Grasslands, I've been to Cypress and I've gone cross country through some of the country, like Killdeer and Wood Mountain but that was a few years ago so I'm ready to do it again.

...

DP: I think so. So, I thank you ever so much for your time Doris and you enjoy the rest of your day.

DO: You're welcome Darren, you too.

DP: Bye bye.

DO: Bye.