

## Thelma Poirier—Parks Canada Interview, March 8, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): Okay. It's March 8<sup>th</sup>, and this is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Thelma Poirier for the Parks Canada Grasslands National Park project. Hello Thelma, how are you?

Thelma Poirier (TP): I'm just fine, thank you.

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

TP: Thelma Poirier, and my home community now is Glentworth, but it has been in the Wood Mountain uplands

DP: Okay. Now, what's your connection to the local Métis in the area?

TP: My sister-in-law was Métis

DP: Okay.

TP: Her name was Bernice Brown ,and she married my brother, James Anderson. Other connections have been, just with a few of the Métis living in the larger Wood Mountain uplands community

DP: Okay.

TP: I have gotten to know a quite a few of them over the years, beginning from childhood.

DP: Okay. What were some of the family names that you remember of the Métis families that lived in the area?

TP: Particular families that we might have had something to do with were Chartrand and Roy, Haggai. I'll probably think of others as we go along.

DP: Okay, no problem. And these are families that lived in the area now some ...?

TP: Not exactly in the area where we were. They are families from Willow Bunch.

DP: Willow Bunch area?

TP: My father had a ranch and he, sometimes, employed some of these people at the ranch, and that's how I first came to know some of them.

DP: So they moved, back and forth, to Willow Bunch area, west of the Wood Mountain to help?

TP: There was a group of men who sheered our sheep. I'm trying to think of their names, but they were from Willow Bunch, and they would come every year when I was a child to shear the sheep. And then, Joe Chartrand used to come and cook at the ranch during the winter. My mother went to town with four of the youngest of us, in our family, so that we could attend school during the wintertime in town. In the summer, we went to a country school and then while she was gone, my father would hire Joe Chartrand of Willow Bunch as a cook. My first memory of Joe, one of my most lingering memories of Joe, was that Joe became Santa Claus, every year at our house. One year, I was about 4 and suspicious of Joe being Santa Claus. In fact, I wrote a little poem about it because I said "You know, he looks just like the cook, Santa looks just like our cook." I said, "look!" and Joe liked bright colours. Joe had a colourful, bright pink satin parka.

DP: Oh, really?

TP: Yes, and as Santa Claus, he wore that parka and he wore, what was called, kind of gum rubber boots around the ranch. He wore heavy wool socks in them, and I said "He looks like, Santa looks just like Joe".

DP: You figured it out?

TP: I didn't really figure it out, I just thought he was ...

DP: He looked like him.

TP: He just looked like him.

DP: Okay. Did most of the families you mentioned, did most of them move away from the area? Did most of them stay?

TP: There were very few Métis families that stayed that were actually living at Wood Mountain during my lifetime, but they had connections.

DP: Okay.

TP: Because our family had connections through employment practices and so forth. When I was a child, Mrs. Brown and her second husband were working for my father, he was not Métis, but her first husband actually wasn't, but Mrs. Brown was Métis, the daughter of Jules Haggai. And they were working on the ranch for my father, and she had a son about our age, Tony Brown, and he rode to school with us, with my sister and I. He was our companion. We had 7 miles to ride to school. Tony rode with us, and he was very artistic. He was a very artistic person. And then eventually, my brother Jim married Mrs. Brown's daughter.

DP: Okay. So where did you and the Brown children go to school?

TP: We went to a country school called Sister Butte with just this one boy, Tony who rode to school with us.

DP: Okay. When your father hired these Métis ranch hands, did they speak English or French together?

TP: When they were together, they spoke French.

DP: Okay.

TP: Lots of times there was only one, or the like the sheep shearers would only speak French to each other. I remember the shearers coming into the house and sheep shearing is done by hand, and it was very greasy with a lot of, dirty work. I remember them coming to the house and everyone at our house always washed their hands before meals, and the hired help would wash up before meals and came to the table, cleaned. My father told the sheep shearers that they didn't need to wash. He said, "Don't bother about washing, just sit down at the table and eat." And, I think he did that because everything was so greasy, but they were happy. They chatted along as they were shearing and so on and so forth. They were very happy.

DP: Did they sing and play fiddle?

TP: Not so much sing, as chat. Talk back and forth.

DP: Okay.

TP: And they were very fast.

DP: Very good at what they did?

TP: Yes, yes. Later on, we had this Tony Brown, when he grew up, also worked as a ranch hand on our ranch. I'm trying to think of the name of another young man that worked on our ranch. I guess if I had the Wood Mountain book in front of me, I would give you a list of names. I could pick it out. Anyway, right now it escapes me.

DP: Okay.

TP: He worked at the ranch to and I went to high school up in Calgary, and I later met up with him out there.

DP: In Calgary?

TP: I was with a group of young people at a house party and he showed up there. I was very surprised.

DP: 'Cause even then, Calgary was still a pretty big city.

TP: Yes it was. I was friends with a group of young people, and quite a few of them were from this area of southern Saskatchewan.

DP: Okay.

TP: It's kind of strange at that young of an age, we didn't make those connections but we did. My sister-in-law, her mother would speak Michif.

DP: Yes.

TP: They would speak that language together.

DP: So you heard Cree mixed in their French when they spoke?

TP: Yes.

DP: Okay.

TP: And they also spoke Sioux, they spoke that as well because my sister-in-law's father was Lakota and English.

DP: Okay. Did the Métis from Willow Bunch get along with the Lakota people in Wood Mountain? Did they generally have a good relationship from what you can remember?

TP: They had many intermarriages.

DP: Quite a few, eh?

TP: Yes, there were. The elders, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Roy, who lived at Willow Bunch mainly, had a daughter who was married to Walter LeCaine. That's just interesting right there. The LeCaine name ...

DP: It's pretty prominent.

TP: Has a rather interesting history. I'm kind of straying around here. The LeCaines, Walter's mother, as a young Lakota woman went to live with a LeCaine now who was supposedly a mounted policeman, and we can find a LeCaine, but it's spelled L-e-Q-u-e-s-n-e among the Mounted Police. We don't find a LeCaine, spelled L-E-C-A-I-N-E, and that is how they had spelled their name. Most of LeCaines go back to using the name, Okute, the Lakota name.

DP: Okay.

TP: And Wood Mountain, I found, the Lakota, in some sense, seemed to feel that they are more singular people. They are just Lakota where as if you find the Métis, when you're mixed up with the Lakota, when you're mixed up with the Cree, when you're mixed up with Ojibway, with everybody, but we're just Lakota. It's almost a superior attitude, that is towards the Métis, among the Lakota.

DP: The mixed-heritage Lakota identify strictly as Lakota. They wouldn't say that we're mixed Lakota?

TP: They don't say they're Métis. They say they are Lakota.

DP: Did, from what you can remember, Thelma, did the Métis encounter any racism in the area? Do you think generally people got along and did their work?

TP: You know, it's hard to know for sure. It's hard to know. You don't know, but if someone was discriminating against someone because they are poor, certainly right in the community, where I was, Tony Brown, we never felt anything of the sort with Tony. We almost felt like he was our brother. We didn't have any feelings of that with Tony, but I think, I don't know what the Métis, themselves actually felt. I suppose I don't really know. For some reason, possibly a lack of education, they didn't have the opportunity to have respected jobs. They didn't have land ownership opportunity that many other people had, and so maybe because of those things. They suffered more from poverty, and I don't know right there, there weren't enough were we lived, that anything was noticeable.

DP: Do you think a lot of it might have been the fact that a lot of the people that lived around the Wood Mountain area weren't really elites in society, you were, you had Lakota, you had Romanians, you had French Canadians, and Métis? That might have something to do with, perhaps, there not being so many outward instances of discrimination.

TP: I think the Métis, probably because, of their financial situation in the community. Without the education, they always had the more menial jobs, and I think, in that way, they grouped together, and felt more comfortable with each other.

DP: With one another?

TP: Than they did with one another.

DP: Any other things you remember about the Métis in the area that strikes you as important?

TP: Well, you know, They certainly were good with horses.

DP: Good horse people?

TP: Wonderful hunters and trappers. Tony Brown trapped and he grew up just like we did, and he became an artist. He made backdrops for television in Calgary, and then he became a pipeline welder, and all sorts of different trades, things that he learned to do. But, he could just go out and trap beaver, or trap whatever, and he just did it naturally and working with horses came natural to him. He had a gift and he had, both him and my sister-in-law, had an artistic talent. Tony, I remember when he was just a boy, he was about 12-years-old, and they were doing art in school, and he drew this butterfly and we didn't know it, and I thought I'd go over there and pick up that butterfly.

DP: You thought it was real?

TP: Mhmm. It was amazing. He had the ability to actually see and then put what he could see on paper.

DP: Do you think that having that common cowboy culture, made it easy for the Métis because they were so good with horses?

TP: Well, I think it made them very acceptable in the ranching community. People in the ranching community, if they were good cowboys, it didn't matter who they were. To be a good cowboy was important. It was almost, as if, they had a little more respect for them, if they were a Métis cowboy, because there was sort of an attitude, people wouldn't expect too much of the Métis people. So then, when they did excel, people were, especially, proud of them.

DP: At the rodeo Wood Mountain, which is the oldest rodeo in Canada, were there a lot of Métis cowboys that entered that rodeo that you can remember?

TP: Well, the Lakota were very dominant at the rodeo and no, I don't particularly remember them, although, I think in the beginning there were many, some of the main groups of competitors started out, some moved on, and the families moved away. We didn't see, so many of the Métis competitors, the Lakota competitors were quite a bit more talented at rodeo, and they dominated the rodeo. The Métis people would often be more involved in the horseracing aspect. They started this horseracing way back, about the 1870s or 1880s. It was a very famous horserace in Wood Mountain, involving a horse named Badeck(?), and the racers from up at Batoche challenged this horse in Wood Mountain, because this horse had just run in Wood Mountain so well, and won so many races, and they actually shovelled out a race track. There was about 3 feet of snow on the ground and they shovelled out the racetrack so they could have this race that winter. Somewhere, I haven't been able to find it, I think it's in the stockyard, in Winnipeg, there's a story of the horse Badeck(?). There were a lot of intermarriage, and the Métis were always good for living off the land. My sister-in-law could pick 3000 pails of berries and not have 1 little speck of anything in it, you wouldn't need to wash those berries or anything. They were picked to perfection. She would make jams and jellies out of the berries.

DP: Saskatoons and chokecherries?

TP: Another thing I remember about her mother, Jenny (Haggie) Brown, was that she loved her sewing machine. Most Métis women in this community made a lot of quilts, and made over a lot of clothing. They would take adult clothing and make it for younger children, and dress their families back then. Today, in this community, there are people I know that are associated with the Métis association and most people in the community wouldn't even think of them as being Métis. I suppose you could say it's been fortunate for us because we have been able to hire young people under special grant programs for the Métis to work for example at the museum at Wood Mountain.

DP: Yes. Well I think a lot of people that you know, through intermarriage and people having to hide their identity because of discrimination find out a little later in life that they are Métis, and they just try to find their way to understanding things about Métis people. And, that's common, we come across many, many people in those circumstances.

TP: Right. That may be the case for some of the people that are now more open in the community.

DP: Could you, you mentioned the Wood Mountain museum, could you tell me a few things about the museum and what Métis programming you've done at the museum?

TP: Well the Wood Mountain Rodeo Ranch Museum is from its title, mainly concerned with rodeo and ranch, but we're also concerned with other cultures that have come to stay in Wood Mountain and become involved in cowboys and ranching and so forth. And so, we have at Wood Mountain a small cabin and an adobe built in the same manner that many of the first Métis houses were built. Built from poles and mud. And, we have in that small building, it's about 12x16, we have artefacts once owned by the Métis of Wood Mountain and we have story lines which tell their story.

DP: Okay.

TP: We haven't done a lot of Métis programming. We have invited different local associations to come and visit that little museum. And, we wouldn't have built that because at one time there was a plan that they were going to do all this over at Willow Bunch. But, we didn't see it happening over there, and everything we'd have visitors coming, and we were using just this little Métis house as just sort of a little catch all. People kept saying, "Why don't you make a Métis exhibit in there?" And now, that's what we have done. And, we find it creates quite a, people are, have a lot of interest in it.

DP: What sort of things are in there? Just everyday sort of artefacts that the people used?

TP: What sort of things? Well there are things like saddles made by Métis saddle makers. There are, I need to think directly, there are models of things like Red River carts. There are things like in the story line like a violin, there are snowshoes, clothing, sometimes like moccasins that might have been made with the floral emblems on them like the Cree made. Trapping equipment, hides, like they might have you know, skinned different animals. There's a bison head in there that someone donated, thought it should be in there. The sorts of utensils, certainly there's a sewing machine, and there's a quilt made by Jenny Haggie. There are pictures of the Métis village, which is one of the oldest villages in the south. It was actually a trading post owned by Joseph Morin that was at Wood Mountain, and there are pictures of that in there.

DP: Oh, okay.

TP: I guess there's one thing that we would like to have that we don't have, maybe you can put out an appeal for us. We would like to have an old hand-carved cross. We don't have one.

DP: Okay, really?

TP: Because the missionaries were very relevant to the Métis lives.

DP: Yes.

TP: They were very much a part of the early Métis story. They are the people who recorded the story. Mainly the people. Jean Louis Légaré, the French trader, also had a journal, you probably well know, but the missionaries were the main recorders of the Métis life.

DP: Yes, that wasn't handed down orally, for written records for sure. In terms of your vision for the museum and the Métis component, what would you like to see happen?

TP: I would like to see a little bit of programming around the story of the Métis. I would like to see a program for schoolchildren where they could bring classes to Wood Mountain. We've had some of that with the students from the University of Regina coming out with David Miller.

DP: Okay.

TP: About every other year, he brings his students out from the campus in Regina to visit the museum.

DP: Are they SUNTEP students or?

TP: I think so.

DP: Okay. Yeah, those are our students then. So you would like to see maybe more cooperation with Gabriel Dumont Institute from Regina?

TP: Yes, that would be wonderful for some programming like that. We had, Parks Canada brought a woman from Swift Current to our museum, and we had other Métis people come. For example, we had a Métis man come at rodeo time and demonstrate rope making.

DP: Oh, okay.

TP: And it would be nice to have someone come and demonstrate some cooking skills or ...

DP: Like jigging or something?

TP: Or canning skills. There's a young man in the community, but I don't know if he's Métis, but more of this could be done. We have such a low population and so few Métis, really to get this going well we need to have someone on our board who is of the Métis culture.

DP: Yes.

TP: And we don't have that. We don't have that person on our board. And so, it isn't a priority to the people on our board who think the be all and end all is the rodeo story.

DP: Or Lakota stuff?

TP: Well yes, or even Lakota. We need, we need to recognize these people, and there are things that could be done, but you know it's kind of sad, like I find it sad that I've devoted my whole life, you could say, to the history of all these different people, and as I'm winding down. I don't necessarily find in the community the interest in carrying on what I've started. I don't know if they will maintain an interest in the Métis cabin. The present board doesn't seem to have a lot of interest in it. I have and I've promoted it along with a few Métis people from the community.

DP: Perhaps...

TP: Perhaps there would be more, you know it's too bad Willow Bunch didn't get off the ground with their own Métis village, of course, because that is the community that would have more ability to promote this than we have. But, at the same time, I think a very important part of the story happened at Wood Mountain. Wood Mountain was where some of the first big trading posts were.

DP: Well and the Willow Bunch Métis are the Wood Mountain Métis and vice versa. The families just moved back and forth so.

TP: Well they mostly moved away to Willow Bunch.

DP: But I meant at one time it was ...

TP: The families moved back and forth. Another family I failed to mention but lived a lot at Wood Mountain was the Gaudry family too.

DP: Yes.

TP: And what happened was the Haggais and the Gaudrys both found employment with the early North West Mounted Police at Wood Mountain, and that was their reason for staying in the community. They acted as scouts or assistants to the police in some ways.

DP: And they eventually settled in the Scout Lake side of Wood Mountain?

TP: Well Haggais lived there, they lived right at the post, near the police post, and they eventually settled over at Willow Bunch. And Gaudrys were more to the east.

DP: Okay.

TP: I've had a lady there show me where the Gaudry cabin was, and where the Haggai cabin was when they lived there.

DP: Oh, okay.

TP: But I need to get a filing system and get all these little bits and pieces of information together. I think that's the reason my life work, remainder of my life is to get my own papers organized so that someone else can find them useful references.

DP: Well I'm sure there's got to be a history buff in the area. If I lived down there, I would certainly ...

TP: You don't, there's not a history buff in this area that is willing to put much, like, no. I don't know how I happened. To exist as a historian, but I'm sure it was the influence of my parents who were already older. And then, it was such a rich cultural community. And somehow, I was drawn into history, but I don't know. I don't know of anyone from this community who wants to follow it up to quite this degree. Although there may be a possibility some way in the future. For example, the young woman that's coming to work at the museum this summer, Clair Thompson is totally engaged in history. And to me, it's like a dream come true because there may be a person that I can pass all of my Lakota records on to.

DP: Well if she's eager, and she has the ancestry and training she would be ideal.

TP: She's been accepted to present her speech or her paper on the Wood Mountain Lakota at the United Nations Aboriginal gathering the first week of June in New York.

DP: Good for her.

TP: So we're very, we're very proud. And, she requested the job at our museum. So can you think of anything that can be more of a dream come true if this all works out?

DP: No, no. She's the perfect candidate for that for sure.

TP: I think she is. I've waited, and waited and waited. And you know Dr. David Miller from the university in Regina he said just wait, it will happen. It will come, just be patient. And, I'm so glad. I have been patient because I just sort of sense in my heart she's the right person. One of the most fun events I've attended, Métis events, was, if you can believe this, was the 70th wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Roy. Mrs. Roy was Haggai. Her daughter was married to Walter LeCaine, and they had the 70th anniversary at their place. And, my father had a very good relationship with all the Lakota people and the Métis people in the area. And, we were invited, there weren't many other people who were not Métis or Lakota invited. In fact, I don't know if there were any, there was one

or two other families there. And, we were invited to attend that wedding anniversary celebration. And, they had a church service following that. They had a wonderful meal of traditional foods. I don't remember the foods much, but what I remember so distinctly is this little tiny woman and this little tiny man, about age 92 who got up and danced the "Red River Jig." And, and if I were an artist I would paint that picture of those people in that little cabin doing that dance, and the people playing on the violin, I can hear the music to this day. It was probably the most, I think it was things like that, that made me a historian.

DP: To see that history. And when was this roughly?

TP: That was in 1951. I was eleven-years-old.

DP: So 70 years?

TP: And they had been married 70 years then. And they were married, well their honeymoon was the buffalo hunt.

DP: Oh, wow.

TP: Leaving from Wood Mountain and going westward on a buffalo hunt was their honeymoon. Just like Jean-Louis Légaré, his honeymoon was a buffalo hunt too.

DP: Yeah, can you imagine the history that they lived and how the world changed?

TP: And they lived, and that opportunity to go to that. Let me share that culture in a very special way. I've had some recognition because we said prior to that when I was a child we had the Métis sheep shearers, you know, and those people in our home. So I could, and Joe Chartrand too, and so I could kind of relate to them, but these people seemed to me to be so old and so little. And, everyone was so amazed that they could get up and still dance that jig at that age.

DP: That's incredible.

TP: And I remember it being very colourful. I remember there being people, quite a few people dressed in plaids. And, there was quite a bit of red around. And, the men, that little man, I know, I know that he was dressed in a little, in a little black suit, but he has a white shirt and a colourful tie. They weren't really wearing sashes and all those things like that. But they were dressed up like they were dignified people, and they were dignified. And, everyone made us feel so welcome that day. When we came in there, you know, I think there was one other family from the community that was there that was not Métis when we went there that day, and we were welcome, totally welcome. And I can remember my sister and I visiting with other girls. The LeCaine girls that we knew or had known. They, the LeCaines, used to come to my father's place in the wintertime and stay in a cabin,

and it was during very hard years when they maybe didn't have a lot. But, they would do chores, barn chores, and things like that. And, the girls would help my mother in the house. My mother had arthritis and they would help her in the house. And, we so we sort of had a special relationship with those people, those wonderful people.

DP: So those are some of your best memories that you remember of Métis people?

TP: Well that one, that and riding to school with Tony Brown are amongst my very best memories. That dance and then riding. And of course, Joe Chartrand and the Christmas story, what a wonderful memory that is too. I could write a little book. I wrote one story you know, about Métis children in the book on *Children of the Wood Mountain Uplands*.

DP: Yes, we have that. I saw that.

TP: I wrote the story about what the little boy was going to be when he couldn't be a buffalo hunter anymore, he was going to be a cowboy. And, that was so true for so many of them.

DP: Yeah, good cowboys. Switching to Parks Canada, what sorts of things would you like to see them do at Grasslands to increase our knowledge of Métis history and culture? Would you like to see more partnerships maybe with the Wood Mountain museum? Or would you rather ...

TP: We have a good partnership with them at the present time. We don't really, there hasn't really been much. They do programming and they do public programming. And, they could do programs, like they have brought in this one Métis lady at times but they have programs down at the east block of the park. And, I think it would be wonderful if they brought it, we need more Métis music. We had a Métis day at Wood Mountain, or a Métis, we dedicated one whole summer back in the 1980s to the Métis. We made a quilt that made you think of the Métis people. We exhibited things that we borrowed, people would donate them too, from Métis people, we cooked Métis food, and we had Métis dancing come to our museum. But it didn't happen again. But at that time, we had somebody who was very interested in the Métis and that was Father Ducharme.

DP: Okay.

TP: Was the parish priest in this area and he helped us put this together. And, the park, you know, the park could encourage more of a Métis cultural time.

DP: So that would be some of the things you would look towards? Well, I think that would be successful. I can remember being a kid and we'd go to the Wood Mountain museum and we'd churn butter and we'd make homemade bread, and that's one of the things I remember about being a school kid.

TP: You make me feel very old, unless you're very young and I would feel younger.

DP: Well, I'm 41 so.

TP: You're pretty young.

DP: I probably did ...

TP: Now that was just about the time we were starting our programming, I think.

DP: Yeah. So, I was probably about ten or so when that happened. But, I do remember that and I do remember the museum had a bottle of wine with my last name on it so I thought that was kind of neat. I don't know ...

TP: You know there's lots of things, many, things that they could do and also, over at Val Marie they could have a tour of sites from the research sites, they could have a tour in the park to show the places where the Métis lived in that valley. They could do things like that. They could have a Métis day like at Val Marie and something over in the Wood Mountain area too. They could easily do that just like they did when they had that lady come, but we didn't have much response unfortunately. She came from Swift Current and I can't remember her name.

DP: Cecile Blanke?

TP: What a wonderful person she is.

DP: Cecile Blanke?

TP: Yes, Cecile. But we didn't have a good crowd, but I don't think it was well advertised, and when the Park puts out something, they do the advertising and we're not allowed to. So, we don't have the avenues when we work with them because they're kind of held back by regulations.

DP: They have bureaucracy that's different from what you or I would encounter. Yeah, that's unfortunate. But, you definitely would like to see more cultural programming with a tie into the museum?

TP: With a tie into the schools.

DP: That's key, eh?

TP: That's important. But, if we had a school program that focussed on Métis culture I think that would be good. I don't know, I'd like to know, where Métis culture fits into the curriculum of Saskatchewan.

DP: It's not mandatory, I don't think. So, it's pretty much at the discretion of the schools and school boards.

TP: Anyway, I do think I have to go now.

DP: Okay, I ...

TP: I have some things I have to do here.

DP: Okay well, I thank you very much Thelma ...