

Pat Stewart—Parks Canada Interview, January 27, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): I guess I should start with...well I should formerly start the interview. This is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Pat Stewart for the Parks Canada Project, and its January 26th

Pat Stewart (PS): 7th.

DP: 27th. Okay, hello Pat how are you?

PS: I'm good, thank you.

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

PS: My name is Pat Stewart, I live in Val Marie Saskatchewan. I've been here now, I'm going into my 11th year here, I came from Ontario. I bought a house, and have settled here.

DP: Okay. When you came out west, did you have any preconceived notions of Métis, or did you know anything about the Métis? I know you had spent a lot of time with First Nations in Ontario.

PS: I did, and I was brought out here after my friend and my companion died, he was an Ojibway man. His nephew lives in Waywayseecappo, Manitoba, and he asked me to come out for the Sun Dance. I thought it was just to watch, but he suggested that I take part in Sun Dance, which is a commitment for four years. So, when my sister came with me in the third and fourth years, we came down to Val Marie to do photography. So I was introduced to Louise Moine as being the first, I guess, Métis person that I had ever met, I may have met others without knowing. I was introduced to her by a lady here in the community, and so I started visiting Louise and her son Gail, who looked after her in the house. Louise was getting up in years, she was in her 90s, and she couldn't read very good. She was an avid reader, and writer, so she needed someone to read to her, and I volunteered. So, I used to go over just about every day for an hour or two, and I would read to her, whatever she wanted me to read. She enjoyed a variety of different literatures.

DP: Okay.

PS: I know her son was listening, because every once in a while, like he worked in the kitchen, but he would come to the door and ask a question about what I was reading. He was a very smart man too, but he had been in an unfortunate accident and had been ... Brain injured a little bit by some exhaust fumes, so a lot of people didn't think he was that smart, but he actually was.

DP: Okay.

PS: Louise was confined to a wheelchair for a number of years. Her house is situated, it looks onto my house really at an angle, and into the back of my house, and there's an empty field in the back, behind the arena and the curling rink. When rodeo time was on, they would put all the horses and the bulls and everything in this field, and Louise used to just really enjoy sitting in her chair, looking out the window at the livestock. She was kind of brought up in the country, with horses mainly. Her family travelled, as you probably have in literature, they constantly were on the move. Then Louise married a Frenchman named Vic, and they built this house behind me, and that's where they lived then, and raised their family. I would be over there every day, and read to Louise. I remember her stopping me one day as I was reading a romance story to her, which she really liked, and she said that that was one thing she missed, was having a man's arms around her.

DP: Aww...

PS: I thought, "Well, I guess that never changes, no matter how old you get, does it?"

DP: No...No.

PS: But, they were very generous people. I was in this house, when I bought this house, I had nothing in here. All of my furniture and everything was back east. So, she told Gail to go into their storage place, at the back, and to get out a bed for me so I'd have a place to sleep in my house.

DP: Okay.

PS: They would share whatever they had, and her daughter Jacquie used to come down fairly often to visit, and I really hit it off with Jacquie, she was a great person. She lives now in Regina, and we would talk about her life and Louise. I asked Louise one time about her time in the residential school, and she was kind of evasive. She was a very optimistic person, and didn't like to talk about negative things.

DP: Okay.

PS: But, when you read the part that she dictated, I did part of her history and edited it for her, and I gave it to Jacquie, and I believe it's the copy that you have...

DP: Yeah, will have, yes.

PS: Oh, I still have my copy here, so I was reading through that again to just refresh my memory, and, yeah, they had some bad times with food, and I guess some mistreatment, but she never dwelled on it, she never really listed any. I have other friends back east who are First Nations who've told me horror stories of what happened to them, or members of their family, but Louise would never dwell on that.

DP: A very positive person.

PS: Very positive. She played piano when she was younger. The whole family was musical. I guess when they could ill afford it, and when they were living in Ponteix, her father made sure that he got a piano, and some of them took lessons on the piano. But, some of her brothers played a fiddle and different musical instruments, and they sang. They were very musical.

DP: The Trotters in general are very musical. I know Kathy Grant's family is very musically inclined too.

PS: Oh, her whole family. Most of her kids, except for her daughter who never wanted to do that publicly, but I understand she has a beautiful voice; yeah they all play in Kathy's band.

DP: Okay. How do you think Louise was viewed upon by the community at large at Val Marie? Was she a respected person?

PS: I believe so, by the people who lived here. I never heard anything really negative about her, or her family. Near the end, she got really helpless, being in a wheelchair, and she couldn't help Gail very much, to lift herself. In her bedroom, there was sling down from the ceiling, and Gail had an almost like a rubber belt that went around a little higher than her waist, and then he would hook this up, and it would help him swing her from the chair into the bed. He had ways of handling it.

DP: Okay.

PS: She got that she was ... like to get to the bathroom was difficult, 'cause her bathroom wasn't built for a wheelchair person. It was a lot of lifting for Gail, she was a big woman, and he was as thin as a rake, so it was heavy for him. But, I never heard Gail complain, not one word. It was amazing the way he looked after her.

DP: Sounds like it.

PS: It kept her out of a nursing home, until finally Gail was getting sick himself. It ended up that he had pneumonia when he left here and had to go to the hospital in Regina, and he had cancer.

DP: Did he pass on?

PS: Yes, he did.

DP: When did Gail pass on?

PS: Oh, gosh, I've lost all track of time.

DP: Was it before Louise or after?

PS: No, after Louise. Yeah, she was gone; he was still in the house for a while after she was gone. She went into a nursing home, and he used to go and visit her. She was in Mankota and then she moved, I believe to Ponteix, and Gail used to go and visit her.

DP: Okay.

PS: After she died, Gail, he was lost. That was his life, was looking after his mother.

DP: Never had a family of his own?

PS: No, no. They used to ask me, when I was going to Swift Current, they would give me a list, and ask me to pick up some things for them. Some of them were personal items for Gail, and creams and things that Louise used. Now, Louise had the most beautiful skin. Even at 100 or so. She was almost 102 when she died, her skin was unblemished and beautiful. Kind of rosy and smooth. She said that was due to Olay.

DP: Oil of Olay, hmm...

PS: Yeah, Oil of Olay.

DP: So she used that all the time?

PS: She did, yeah. She would have been a good advertisement for that product.

DP: Oh, for sure...

PS: No, she was an amazing woman. She recounted her stories of life on the prairies, between Lake Pelletier and the Qu'Appelle Valley, and down here on the prairie. It's all in that book, that manuscript.

DP: So she always talked in positives about growing up and being Métis, never brought up any of the racism that might have existed?

PS: No, she didn't. Jacquie did tell me of one incident involving Gail. I believe he had gone to the store for something, and some young men grabbed him and dragged him up the alley, and ripped his shirt and scratched all his back, and now whether that was because of what he was, or who he was I don't know. Maybe it was some beef they had with him over something else, but she thought it was racism.

DP: Okay.

PS: But I witnessed some of that when there was some Cree men who came down here to fight a fire, and they were telling me about being jostled a couple of times, but they just let it go by, and it was over. All in all I guess, because Louise didn't get out very much when I knew her, she was in the house and so was Gail. Gail would only come out to go to the store and go back home again. So, I didn't really know them on a social scene.

DP: Okay. So she shared a lot about growing up, told you stories?

PS: Oh, yes.

DP: Were there any special stories that she told you that stick in your mind?

PS: Yes, there was one about her sister Talia. When her sister died ,they took her body, by wagon I believe it was, and they were going to some church and they wanted the priest there to do a little service, just say a few words over the grave. The priest wouldn't do it, he said he was in a hurry and didn't have time. So, they opened the church and went in and they did a little service themselves, and then they buried her.

DP: That was pretty much the nail in the coffin for Louise supporting the Catholic Church?

PS: Ah, I don't know. She didn't go to church because it was hard to get her out, but I think she was still a believer, even when she died.

DP: A spiritual person?

PS: Spiritual person, yeah she was. She could talk to you a lot about, well her family she knew inside out. She was the 8th, I believe, in the family, so she knew everything that had gone on, and she kept good records. Some of her brothers were cowboys, and one raised horses, they were always involved with animals.

DP: So she shared a lot of those stories?

PS: She did, yeah. She talked about everything, so that's why I've got it all down in this book that she started doing. 'Cause she's already published of course, but I think Jacquie was going to try to get the publisher to do this one, but then they, the last I heard they had thought about combining it with someone else's stories, like putting them both in the same book, but I don't think anything came of that.

DP: No, no. We're looking to publish all of her stuff together in a volume here, so I'm in contact with Jacquie about that. Hopefully, in a year or so, maybe year and a half we'll have it.

PS: Oh, that would be great! It would certainly sell some copies down here.

DP: Well, I think so, she certainly was a person who chronicled the history of the region fairly well, and she was a good storyteller.

PS: Oh, excellent!

DP: And there hasn't been much about Métis history in the southwest that's been published, so I think in terms of those issues, I think it would be an important resource.

PS: I have a good picture of her and Gail together. It's on one of her birthdays, and she's wearing a little pointed hat with the elastic around her chin, sitting in her chair.

DP: Okay.

PS: If you wanted a copy of that, I can certainly get one for you.

DP: Sure, that would be great.

PS: Yeah, maybe you can use that in your book.

DP: Oh, for sure.

PS: But Jackie would have numerous photographs I'm sure, of family members.

DP: Yes, I'm in contact with Jacquie, so I'm hoping very soon to get everything related to her mother, and then try to put it together.

PS: They did bring her out for her 100th birthday, and I believe, from what I've heard, she was the first person in Val Marie to actually reach 100.

DP: So the whole town celebrated that event?

PS: Yeah, they had a supper at the hall for the family members, and then they had like a little ceremony for her at the hall. Yeah, It was full.

DP: So it was quite the event put on?

PS: Yeah, yeah, she was amazing. By then, of course, she was getting kind of tired, but she was all dressed up, and every once and a while we'd look over and she'd be dosing a little bit, and then she'd wake up and listen to the rest. Yeah, she was 100.

DP: So, you would say she was almost like the town elder, then?

PS: Yes, she was. Of course, I don't think too many people went to visit her.

DP: Okay, she kept kind of private near the end?

PS: Yeah, yeah. Well, once she was confined to the house, and couldn't get out. But, her family came, like her cousin Cecile came, and then she has relatives in Montana, and they used to come up and visit her, I met a few of them. It was an interesting time for me, to listen to her stories, and to read to her. Of course, Gail would always come in and give us a break every once and a while, 'cause he thought my voice was going to give out. He'd come in with a treat, chocolate or orange or... and then we'd just sit and chat until I went back to the reading.

DP: Okay.

PS: They had a little garden out the back, Gail did that as well, and he was an excellent cook.

DP: Good cook, eh?

PS: Oh gosh, he could bake pies and bread and whatever, didn't matter, he made it. So, she was well fed.

DP: Okay. Are there any other things that stand out, with your time with Louise?

PS: I can't think of anything else, other than what's in her story there that you're going to read. Yeah, it was upsetting for me when she went into the home. It was like the end of an era here, when she had to leave.

DP: She was a big supporter of the park and all the programming that went on there, did the Grasslands park work with her at all, or was she just too elderly?.

PS: Not that I know of, but they might have. Jacquie might have a better idea of that than I do. The only time think I ever saw a park employee go there was when she was, she had frequent falls, because she would try to do something on her own I guess, or Gail wouldn't be able to hold her, and she'd fall. So she big bruises on her knees or legs where she had fallen, but near the end before she went in the home, it was hard, if she fell on the floor, for Gail to get her back up, so they would call our ambulance, and they would send the attendants over to help lift her and get her back in the chair or in bed.

DP: Okay.

PS: Some of the park employees are on the ambulance, so they would go over there, and help lift her up. It got to the point where Gail just couldn't cope anymore with her at home, she needed bathing and so on, and just couldn't get her in the tub. The bathroom just wasn't conducive to a wheelchair person.

DP: No, eventually when she passed on, was the funeral in Val Marie?

PS: Yes.

DP: And all her relatives came?

PS: Yep.

DP: So from the states, and I guess throughout Canada?

PS: Oh, yeah.

DP: So it was quite a few people came?

PS: Yep, she had a good-sized funeral.

DP: What was I going to say.? Now that you live in Val Marie, have you made connections with other Métis people?

PS: Well, Kathy and her family...

DP: Kathy and her family...

PS: Yeah. I used to be friends with Mary, Kathy's mother. Now, she wasn't Métis, but her husband was, and I used to have tea with Mary at the café, and then at the hotel when Aline closed the café, and bought the hotel and we'd go in there for tea. Mary ended up in Ponteix, in an apartment there.

DP: Okay.

PS: It got that she couldn't stay by herself, she was starting to get different things wrong with her, and we would go and visit her there.

DP: And she passed on as well?

PS: Yes, she did.

DP: Oh, okay. In terms of Métis history and culture in and around Val Marie and Grassland National Park, what things would you like to see?

PS: Well, I'm not aware of what they teach in the schools, but I'm a big believer that that's where it starts for Métis, First Nations, or Inuit culture is to teach it at school, and I know at home, back in the school where I came from, I don't think there was that much done in the school. Although, before I left there, I was once asked to go and speak to some of the students and take some of the artifacts that I have and talk to the children at the school. Maybe then, it was just starting to get into the education system.

DP: Okay.

PS: But honestly, I would really like to see some of the First Nations languages taught, I was learning Ojibway when I was back home, I know some of the Cree words are similar.

DP: Mmhmm.

PS: But, yeah if there was a place to go to learn the language, and it was more available, I'm sure more people would maybe learn.

DP: Okay, so more involvement with school kids, more interpretation relating to school kids at the park, more Aboriginal curriculum in the schools, those sorts of things?

PS: Yeah, and not just for the children...

DP: For the adults as well?

PS: The adults as well, I think that's important.

DP: Do you think there is a real need for a better understanding of Aboriginal issue in this part of the world?

PS: Oh, absolutely.

DP: Do you still come across attitudes, you mentioned the Cree gentleman that faced some discrimination, do you still come across attitudes negative towards?

PS: I did when I first came here, because I wore a medicine bag all the time. It had been given to me by an Ojibway lady, and I was in the hotel, on two different instances, but one in particular. There were two or three men sitting at the table next to me, they were here hunting, I don't know where they came from, but they were here hunting. Anyway, they were talking about the "drunken Indians" they see and so on. I guess I just got a little annoyed, and I said, "Well there's a lot of other hotels that I've been around even back home, not that I hang out in hotels, but there was a lot of other races drunk, not just Natives", but for some reason the First Nations people and the Métis stand out. Then they started on the prostitution, the young girls involved in prostitution, and I said, "I come from the biggest city in Canada, we see lots of prostitutes on the street and they're not native." So, it runs in all races, don't just pick on one.

DP: Well, and not to dwell on it, but if the young prostitutes are Aboriginal, who are the johns? You know what I mean? That just seems like a very specious argument.

PS: Exactly. Anyway, at the end of it all, they were talking about working and so on, and I said, "I know a lot of people on unemployment or welfare, and they're not native either." So, at the end of it all, the one man said, "Well you've certainly given us something to think about."

DP: Well, that's good, you maybe made them change their viewpoint?

PS: Well, at least one of the two or three was going to give it some thought, so I thought well that was worthwhile, but for most adult people there is nowhere. Unless you go to a bookstore and you specifically buy a book on native people there really is nowhere for them to go to learn.

DP: No.

PS: I know when John and I, he was the Ojibway man, we went to a language conference in Sudbury one time. We were sitting in there listening and there was a teacher there from Wasauksing First Nation, that's Parry Island. He would say that it was terribly difficult for them to get any material to teach their classes. So, at that time I worked at Scholastic Publications in Richmond Hill, and I was in customer service. Some of the material was returned, and they didn't mind, I asked and they said, "Oh no you can just box up whatever was brought back. So I did. I would store up boxes of stuff, and then I would take a drive up to Wasauksing, it was a couple hours' drive, and I would drop it off with this teacher. He happened to be a Pegahmagabow. Now, I have a book here about forgotten soldiers, and I believe it's his father or his grandfather, was a hero in the war.

DP: Okay.

PS: So, Duncan was teaching the school there, and so I would supply him with book and posters, and then he would spend time and either cover up the English and put in the Ojibway. I don't know how he handled it exactly, but he was thrilled to get the material. One of the things that stuck out at

that conference was that, because I was working for a newspaper, and I was covering stories on Georgina Island, the First Nation there. I got to hear a lot of things that maybe other people didn't.

DP: Okay.

PS: But, I said to them, "It strikes me that you need to get your cause or your problems known by the general public," because nobody knows, nobody knows the real thing, and sometimes the media, I work for the media, but sometimes they misrepresent a problem, or they blow it out of proportion. We had an incident down here where they were all upset because they had read in the paper or heard on the news that the native people were going to come and take over the leased land here. These leases had been in their family for like a hundred years, and they were all terribly upset. Well that's not what was going to happen at all!

DP: No.

PS: So, it all gets misrepresented, but the First Nations people get the blame. But, I think its education, adults and children, all need education.

DP: You think things have improved down there in terms of how people view Aboriginal people since you've moved, or is it a work in progress?

PS: Oh, I think it's a work in progress. We have one lady down here, she works with Parks now, her name is Karin [Smith] Fargey, and she's really great. She tries to bring them into the community, get things organized, but if anything goes wrong, which it did at one of the... They asked me to organize a powwow the next year, and I'm not going to point any fingers, but it was one person, well a series of things at fault that it just didn't come off. The one person that was supposed to come and put on the event went somewhere else, and didn't show up, and left some of the people holding the bag, so to speak.

DP: Yes.

PS: So that didn't go over very good. But, the first thing that got blamed, the first people, were the First Nations.

DP: Yeah.

PS: But people turned out, they were willing to listen and watch, they had a ceremony. Lena Buffalocalf and her husband came. Lena made this tipi, and they had a tipi raising and a little powwow, and it went over very well.

DP: It was well received in the community?

PS: Yeah, yeah. I guess the people that don't believe in it didn't come, but there was a lot of people that showed up.

DP: Okay. You think more things will happen like that in the community in the future?

PS: I don't know. I had such a bad time over the one that I tried to arrange, and people were really upset because... well a couple of people anyway, that were partly in the organization, they were really angry. So I thought, "No, I'm not going to continue with that."

DP: Okay. Are there any other...?

PS: Sorry?

DP: I was just going to say are there any other thoughts you'd like to share about preserving and promoting Métis culture in Val Marie and Grasslands, and your time spent with Louise that you think are important?

PS: Oh, I can't think of anything else, I think we've pretty well covered it.

DP: Okay. Well I thank you for your time Pat; I guess this concludes the interview, so thank you.

PS: Oh, you're very welcome Darren. I appreciate your institute, and if I was closer I would certainly come for classes.

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