

Donna Thane and Catherine Schnell —Parks Canada Interview, January 18, 2012

Disclaimer: *The views presented in this interview are those of the interviewee and are not the views of the Gabriel Dumont Institute. This interview is copyright of the interviewee and can only be used for reference purposes. It can not be republished and/or repackaged in any way without the written permission of the interviewee and/or his/ her successor.*

Bradley Brown (BB): Okay, this is Bradley Brown on January 18th, 2012 conducting an interview for the southwest Métis project that the Gabriel Dumont Institute and Parks Canada are currently doing. Now could you state your name for the record please?

DT (DT): Yes, my name is Donna Thane. T-H-A-N-E, and my home community is Medicine Hat.

BB: Thank you, Donna. Okay we've cleared up question one. Let's move onto question two. Who were or are your parents and grandparents? Where were they from?

DT: My father was Vernon Colin Johnson and my mother Adele Marie, her maiden name was also Johnson. They weren't related, of course. My mother was from Taber, Alberta and my dad was born and raised here in Medicine Hat. His mother's name was May Flora Sanderson Johnson (nee Bray). Her first marriage was to Owen Sanderson. Her second marriage, my grandfather, was George John Johnson. He was from the States, from Illinois. My grandmother, May Flora, was the first child born to the Northwest Mounted Police at Fort Macleod on March 31, 1877.

BB: Okay, thank you. Moving onto question three. Did or does anyone in your family speak Michif or serve in the military? Do you speak Michif?

DT: I think my Grandmother may have spoken Michif, she apparently spoke several languages, but no one else does. My dad and his brothers did not serve in the military but lots of his cousins and an uncle did.

BB: Question four. How were the Métis treated in your community? Did your family encounter racism from the larger community? Do you have specific examples?

DT: I don't have any personal experience with racism. I didn't know I had Métis heritage until I was an adult. But there is a family story going back to my great-grandmother Jemima Bray, at the turn of the century here in Medicine Hat. Her husband J.H.G. Bray was a retired North West Mounted Police, and was a respected business man in the community, but she was not allowed to shop in the stores during the day time. The shopkeepers, because of respect for J.H.G., would open their stores for her in the evenings. That's the only racism that I know about in the family.

BB: And when did this take place, sorry?

DT: J.H.G. and Jemima Bray moved to Medicine Hat July 1, 1892. I imagine this happened sometime during the next few years.

BB: Okay thank you for sharing that. You said that your family didn't know that they were Métis until later on?

DT: My generation only, it just never was specifically mentioned. My dad was very proud of his mom and told stories of how she tanned hides and made clothing, did all of the Metis-type crafts. This makes me think that he must have been subjected to racism, probably in his youth.

DT: My dad is where the Métis line comes through and he just never really mentioned it.

BB: Oh, okay. Okay, we can move onto question five. What other Métis families lived in the vicinity? Were they Michif speakers?

DT: Dad's extended families, his cousins and aunts and uncles. There's tons of them all in Medicine Hat. But I don't know if any of them were Michif speakers, I don't think so.

BB: Do you recognize maybe any of the family names? Like different Métis family names in the area?

DT: Yes. I'm not sure if I know what you mean by recognize them.

BB: Like last names. What other type of last names, like Métis families were there?

DT: That I'm related to you mean?

BB: That you are related to or that you know that are within your community.

DT: Oh, yeah. There's quite a lot actually. Us, descendants from the Johnson line. And, Brays, Crockfords, Anderson, Sandersons, Feeny. If all of the McKays and Brays are included, there are hundreds of people here in Medicine Hat that have Metis heritage and are related to me.

BB: Okay thank you. Yeah, we're not looking, I don't expect you to know all of them but.

DT: But there's lots yes.

BB: Yeah, okay thank you. Moving onto question six. Do you know any traditional Métis stories or songs? Would you care to share them?

DT: Pass, I don't know any.

BB: Seven, what sort of resources did your family harvest? When and where were these collected?

DT: The only thing that I'm personally aware of that my family gathered were berries here in Medicine Hat and in the Cypress Hills. If you mean my family during the last 100 years or so, they were here before the area was settled, so they harvested everything they needed.

BB: Do you know what your family did for a living, maybe in the past? In your father's generation and your grandparents' generation.

DT: My father was an electrician here and worked for the City of Medicine Hat, and his parents were ranchers.

BB: They were ranchers.

DT: Yes. And before them I am descended from the McKays in the Cypress Hills, they were buffalo hunters, had a fur trade post and freighted to Fort Benton.

BB: Yes, yes.

DT: Type of thing.

BB: I'm familiar with Edward McKay's history. So yeah, I had heard about that but it's good to know. So your family does have a history of ranching in the area? And also Edward McKay's history?

DT: Yes.

BB: Okay. Moving onto ...

DT: Hold on just a second.

BB: Yep. Absolutely.

DT: Okay, my sister Cathy just came.

BB: Yep. Question eight. What sort of traditional medicines were used in your community and family? Who were the medicine people in your family and community?

DT: I'm going to have to pass on that because I really didn't have any.

BB: Question nine, did anyone in your family live in a Métis road allowance community?

DT: No.

BB: Question ten. Did you have anyone in your family that made beaded or embroidered moccasins or other items? Do you know what happened to these artefacts?

DT: There are a few things still within the family that our grandmother made that were beaded and on leather that she tanned.

BB: Do you know what type of things that your grandmother made?

DT: Oh, through family stories she did all kinds of tanning of hides and making gloves and mitts and leather leggings and moccasins. She did all kinds of handwork. One of the items that Dad mentioned was the hides from long-haired dogs that she tanned with the hair on for winter mitts. He said the leather on his clothing would eventually wear out but the sinew sewing never did.

BB: Okay.

DT: I'm going to put you on speaker now because my sister Cathy is here. There are you there.

BB: Hello? Hello?

DT: Hello.

BB: Hi can you hear me?

DT: Yes.

BB: If your sister is going to partake can I get her just to state her name for the record?

CS: It's Catherine. C-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E. And now my last name, Schnell.

BB: Okay, oh, was that all you had to say about the beaded and embroidered moccasins and other items?

DT: I think so.

CS: The violin.

DT: Oh, he's asking about things she made or any family members made. And the only things we have that are still around from grandma, a little bit of beadwork, some of her beading. The beads that aren't made up, new born calf hide that she tanned and turned into a vest for my dad when he was a boy. We still have that. A few things like that but she was quite known for making gloves.

BB: Okay, good to know.

CS: And fringed jackets, like leather jackets with fringe. A neighbour of hers, their daughter they had one that they had commissioned to be made and she was trying to find it. She contacted me a few years ago, and said they obviously got rid of it, they couldn't come up with it.

BB: Oh okay. So your grandmother made all types of garments and jackets and stuff then?

CS: Yes and she tanned her own hides I know that for sure.

BB: And she tanned her own hides.

CS: I talked to my cousin, Anne and she said her dad, my dad's brother, told her she used to skin the animals and tack them onto the barn door.

BB: Oh, okay.

CS: And turn them into things. She said, he always liked it better when she did the extra work and boiled the brains and made them soft instead of having the raw hide on the back.

BB: Yeah. Okay, thank you. Moving onto question 11. How did your family celebrate special occasions and holidays such as Christmas, Easter or New Years?

DT: We didn't really. Go ahead...

CS: Yeah, because of religion, with our mother we did, with our father ... Our mother was Mormon, our father was Jehovah Witness.

BB: Okay, okay. We can move onto question twelve then. Oh, that was good how you guys answered that. If you both have something to say can the one person just wait until after the other one is talking?

CS: That would make things easier for you wouldn't it?

BB: Yeah just when we are typing these out, that way you won't have to figure out whose voice is who.

DT: Right.

BB: Okay but thank you, that last question went well. So moving onto question twelve. Was anybody in your family involved with the Métis Society?

DT: Not until our generation. Like my siblings and I.

BB: And how were you involved with the Métis Society or how are you involved with them?

DT: We joined the Miywasin Centre and became involved through them.

CS: This is Cathy. We all belong to the local Métis 8. And my children that live in Medicine Hat have obtained membership as well. We have the provincial membership; also the lifetime membership.

BB: Okay, so Cathy, and Donna, you both were some of the first members in your family to become involved with the Métis Society and become members of it and Cathy, your children have become members of it also, correct?

CS: Correct. I guess I was the first one to join. And then brought the information to my siblings and they all joined. And a lot of their children, the ones that live in Medicine Hat actually have all joined. All of the children and grandchildren, we all have them listed.

BB: Okay good. Thank you.

CS: You're welcome.

BB: Moving onto question 13. How are the local Métis connected to Fort Benton, Fort Walsh, and or Grasslands National Park?

DT: I'm not sure how to answer this. Because you know about, this is Donna speaking, about Edward McKay so that is how we're connected I guess. Through our great-grandparents, Edward and Caroline McKay.

BB: Just for the purpose of the interview, could you just provide a brief history of how Edward was involved with the fort?

DT: Edward and Caroline and two of his married sons started a trading post and a little bit of a settlement close to where the fort was eventually built. Before the North West Mounted Police came, they were there, and had been there for several years. He, like I say, had a trading post there and freighted down to Fort Benton. When the North West Mounted Police were scouting around the Cypress Hills trying to find where they were going to build a fort, they came upon the McKay settlement and decided to build there beside them. So they were there before the North West Mounted Police came. They also carried the mail between Fort Walsh and Fort Benton. They also supplied Fort Walsh with meat, dairy products, vegetables etc. They moved to Medicine Hat when the North West Mounted Police moved their headquarters out of Cypress Hills. The buffalo were mostly gone by this time. Am I forgetting anything Cathie?

CS: I think that Edward was also partly responsible for bringing the North West Mounted Police to the Cypress Hills

DT: Yeah.

CS: Donna can finish, she knows this better than me.

DT: After the Cypress Hills massacre he wrote a letter to the Government asking that some sort of police force be sent as the whiskey traders were getting more and more violent. A group came up from Montana looking for a stolen horse and when they came upon a camp of peaceful Indians they killed them all. I guess that's it.

BB: Where, can you just state for the record, where he relocated after that?

DT: Medicine Hat.

BB: And that's how your family has its roots in Medicine Hat, correct?

DT: Yes, partly. They all seemed to come here. When our great grandfather, J. H.G. Bray, retired from the Northwest Mounted Police in 1882 he ranched at Pincher Creek for a few years and then he moved his family here to Medicine Hat.

BB: Oh, okay. Okay thank you. So you guys have history connecting to Fort Walsh then correct?

DT: And to some extent to Fort Macleod through our great-grandfather. He was in the trek bringing the troops here in the first trek in 1873.

BB: Oh okay.

DT: So he was a sergeant major, he helped train the new troops for the trip. Then he was involved in the building of Fort Macleod. Yeah, Fort Macleod then when that was built he and B Troop got sent to the Cypress Hills to build a post there. He married one of Edward McKay's daughters, Jemima. And consequently, my grandmother Flora was the first baby born to the North West Mounted Police in Fort Macleod.

BB: Oh okay. So you have family history relating to both Fort Walsh and Fort Macleod?

DT: Yes.

BB: Okay, thank you. Moving onto question 15. Are there any historically and culturally significant landscapes or historical sites within Fort Battleford and Fort Walsh which you as a Métis person consider to be important?

DT: I'd have to pass on that one. I don't have anything.

CS: Actually yes I do. I believe that Edward and Caroline's homestead, oh I guess we're going to cover that further down. It's significant, but it isn't actually marked or even actually written about. So where they had their fort, or their trading post to me would be very important.

BB: At Fort Walsh correct?

CS: Yes near Fort Walsh. I guess Fort Walsh was different like Donna had stated, they were there for first and Fort Walsh was built near by.

BB: Oh okay.

DT: So we have a bit of an idea for that on question 22 but for 15, not really.

BB: Okay, no that's fine. Moving on to question 16. Was your family involved in the 1885 Resistance at or near Fort Battleford, Fort Walsh and/or Grasslands National Park? If not, were they involved elsewhere?

DT: I don't think, well they were involved, the McKays were involved all over the place throughout the whole thing. J.H.G. Bray was retired from the NWMP at that point and he re-enlisted or signed up again for the Rocky Mountain Rangers so he was involved. Several of the McKays were scouts and interpreters. They were all on the government's side. One of the McKays was captured by Riel and held for a while. One of Edward's sons, Alexander, after the first rebellion, uprising, was sent down to Montana to spy on Louis Riel basically. So they were, the McKays, very much involved. Lots of them.

BB: Okay thank you. Moving on to question 17. What happened to your family after the 1885 Resistance?

DT: Nothing that we know about really. Things carried on the way they were I suppose.

BB: Okay thank you. Question 18. Has your family been in the area for a long time? How did they make a living? Do you know how your ancestors made a living in the region?

DT: I think I sort of covered what Edward did. The first, oh gosh, it goes right back to our great, great, whatever, grandfather Matthew Cocking, who in the 1700s was one of the first Caucasians to see the Rocky Mountains travelling from the east. Members of the family were involved everywhere in the development of Western Canada and had many different professions.

BB: Okay.

DT: And that was in the 1700s. So I don't know quite how to, don't know quite how to answer this question. They've just been here forever. The first Caucasian in the family came to Hudson Bay in 1714. So they've just always been here mostly working for the Hudson's Bay Company. Some of them were free traders supplying buffalo to the different forts and things like that

CS: (Inaudible)

DT: Yes. I don't know have I answered it enough?

BB: Yeah, I think for the most part. I think what we are trying to do or what we want to try and find with this question is just if you've noticed any trends in your family history. 'Cause it seems like you have a lot of family history maybe in the southwest part of the province, and then towards, closer to Medicine Hat, and then what it's asking is did you notice any trends on what those generations did there? And it seems like from what you're saying is that your family has largely been connected to the Hudson's Bay Company and making a living through that connection to the fort. Am I correct?

DT: Yes. Members of the family lived all over Western Canada not just in Alberta. Lots of them were Hudson's Bay Co. people, but there were also Anglican ministers, teachers, free traders, explorers, buffalo hunters. It seems that members of the McKay and Sinclair families were everywhere.

BB: Okay. And you have a long history of that dating back to the, it sounded like early 1700s.

DT: Correct.

BB: Yeah and then the only other thing that would be different is when, when you said Edward McKay moved to Medicine Hat, and then you started noticing that some more people took up ranching, is that what you said earlier?

DT: Yes quite a lot of them did, maybe some took the land grants and I know some homesteaded, so that is probably how they started ranching.

BB: Oh, okay.

DT: Grandma had a cattle ranch and she supplied chickens, eggs, butter, milk, like a dairy farm as well. And horses right, as well?

CS: Grandma Flora.

BB: No, I think we got a good answer for question 18. Like, I said it was more of a general question just trying to see what sort of trends had been happening in your family history so I think we covered that. We could probably move on to question 19. What sort of relationship did the Métis have with the Mounted Police at Fort Walsh?

DT: I would say pretty good because they intermarried. I don't know what to say. It must have been a very good relationship.

BB: So I guess just for clarification sake, you found that a lot of the Métis families, at least in your family's history, intermarried with the Mounted Police?

DT: Yes, three of the McKay girls did end up marrying Northwest Mounted Police members, Jules Quesnelle married Rachel, J.H.G. Bray married Jemima, and, _ O'Hare married Emma. Yeah, I think the McKay family had a very good relationship with the Mounted Police in Fort Walsh.

BB: Yeah and that's the type of question, that's what we're trying to take from it is just seeing how the Métis, what their relationship was with the police 'cause it was different in other areas too.

DT: Yes, yes.

BB: So, we're noticing a lot of similar stories to yours where in fact the Métis had a very close relationship with the Mounted Police at Fort Walsh.

DT: Right.

BB: Okay, thank you. Question twenty: did any of your ancestors work for the Mounted Police at the Mounted Police posts at Fort Walsh? If so, can you tell us anything about them? We may have covered some of this but just for clarification sake, could you just briefly go over that?

DT: Yes, Edward and his sons worked for the NWMP. They supplied them with buffalo and later when the buffalo were hard to find with beef. They also supplied milk, butter and cheese, that kind of thing, to the fort. They had a freighting business to move supplies between Fort Benton and Fort Walsh. They also carried the mail between the forts. I'm sure they acted as scouts as well. I guess that covers it.

BB: And pardon me, did you say that the daughters had married Mounted Police from there?

DT: Yes, three of them.

BB: Three of them.

CS: (Inaudible)

BB: Okay that should be good thank you. Question 21, do you know if your ancestors took Métis Scrip at Fort Walsh, did they take it elsewhere?

DT: From what I can tell, some did at Fort Walsh. Mostly here around Medicine Hat they took it.

BB: Okay, thank you. Moving on to question 22. How can Parks Canada make Fort Walsh more inviting for Métis visitors? How might Parks Canada include more information on the Métis history of these areas?

DT: One thing that we all sort of feel is Fort Walsh is wonderful, they've done a wonderful job there, but they always just seem to focus on the Farewells Trading Post. They don't ever mention the McKays' trading post. It was a substantial settlement, but it isn't identified, like where is it, where was it? McKays do come up occasionally in their little re-enactments, but I think there should be more of what they were doing there and about how they were living before the North West Mounted Police came. Going on buffalo hunts and trading. We would just like to see more information made available on the McKay, McKays as a group.

CS: This is Cathy. Or maybe the whole, the fort I would say is maybe 90% based on the North West Mounted Police, which I get, it should be, but I would like to see more focus on the Métis. The people that were there to begin with. And actually, in some of the history that I've come across, they've referred to our great-great-grandfather Edward, as a "squatter." But that's probably part of what I'd like taken out. I don't consider him a squatter and I'm fairly certain he didn't either.

BB: Okay, thank you. Move on to question 23. Are there specific people or community groups that you would recommend Parks Canada contact to improve their interpretation of Métis history and culture at Fort Walsh?

DT: I can't think of anybody, like a group or, I can't think of anyone. Can you Cathy?

CS: I'm not quite sure I understand the question. I'm just reading it again.

BB: I think what the question is trying to ask and what the purpose of it would be is that like obviously you both feel that Parks Canada could do certain things to enhance the experience at Fort Walsh. So this kind of question follows up with that, it is asking would you know any people that you could direct them to help accomplish this? Like do you know anyone that could, any community people or groups that you could direct them to that would be able to help them enhance an experience at Parks Canada, or at Fort Walsh?

DT: I guess just Métis local 8. And I'm not too sure what their involvement could be in it, but I'm sure they would have input and better resources than I do; than we do personally as to who would be suited for that. I'm sure they would have information on that. You may have already contacted them.

CS: Maybe Nelson Hogg?

DT: There we go. He would know.

BB: That's funny. I just interviewed Nelson a couple days ago.

DT: Oh we're related.

BB: Yeah, I figured after going through all that.

DT: He might be a resource person to contact.

BB: Sounds good, thank you for your input. I think I'm going to skip question 24 and 25 because that more refers to Grasslands National Park. And it seems like your family history more or less connects to Fort Walsh. And that's what I did with Nelson too. So I guess at that, we'll leave it at that question. I just want to give you guys an opportunity to say any comments you may feel like you want to share or anything like that right now, before we wrap up the interview.

CS: I can't off the top of my head. I did have some things written down and forgot to bring them. So, I think my main one was like Donna's, to have more recognition of the McKays at Fort Walsh.

BB: Okay.

DT: I can't think of anything. I think it's wonderful what you're doing. Oh, I do have a question, what is your goal with this again?

BB: Well the goal of this is actually, I'm just going to stop the transcriber because I think we are done with the interview part.

DT: Very good.

BB: We can talk about this ... just one second.