

Margaret Harrison Road Allowance Interview with Darren Préfontaine, January 27, 2024

This interview is an amalgam of the formal interview and a pre-interview discussion.

Margaret Harrison (MH): There's so much I could talk about that is so impressive with our people that lived there; the different things that they did. But for me, because I'm doing the rug hooking, doing designs and stuff, I just have to close my eyes and go to the hills, and then I just see so many things. It's just beautiful.

Darren Préfontaine (DP): It's such a phenomenal part of Métis history and I've never met anyone who lived in the road allowance that wasn't colored by it and how it imprinted their life, and how it affected the lives of their kids and grandkids. The stories and the memories are just incredible

MH: Well, it's such a nice thing. It's amazing how they chose there, and I know they would always go where the water is. So, therefore, I guess that is where most of our stories are, by the rivers and by the lakes, in those areas. But to choose the valley, we're just so fortunate that these people came down to that area and I grew up there. Everything I think about it just seems to go back there.

DP: Magical place.

MH: It is.

DP: I come from a valley in Southern Saskatchewan as well. They are kind of an oasis. It's not as big as the Qu'Appelle Valley, but my hometown is Rockglen, which is like Willow Bunch, with the small valley, but still a nice little picturesque community. All the resources were there, so I can see why people chose to move to these places. It's hilly as heck where I'm from, inside the hills and the coolies, there are all sorts of trees, shrubs, bushes.

MH: Yup, like the different trees and the different fruits that we have there. We really had a cornucopia of just every fruit, and the medicines that Koohkoom went and found and used to heal us. She was the midwife there and she knew a lot about medicines, and I wish I could have learned more from her.

DP: What was your koohkoom's name?

MH: Vitaline Pelletier, but she was a Cardinal.

DP: You know, one question, and I've been stumped. Your mum, what year did she pass? I can't find any information.

MH: She passed in 2004.

DP: I found her birth year, but I couldn't find it anywhere online. The reason I ask for that is because for this project, I list hundreds of community people and I thought it was important to include when they were alive, just so people could get a sense of their time frame. I tried to mention that for every person in the book. About 95 percent of the people have dates, but some I couldn't find for whatever reason, such as bad records or the Sixties Scoop. Things happened. But I wanted to have all the dates of the people because I think it is important to remember them and honour them. Say, for instance, for your dad, I have the dates that he was alive and when he passed. So, for your mum, I will have that now, too. So, I thank you for that.

MH: I have something. I ordered my birth certificate, the long form birth certificate recently, and on there, they got my mother's name wrong. I can't remember what it was, but it's not Racette. It's Rousey or something like that. So, it's just a misspelling, and so, I did contact Vital Statistics and they said that's how it was written.

DP: An English person took it down.

MH: Yes.

DP: If you look at the census records, they mash all our names.

MH: So, that's just recently that I saw this and I thought that it would be interesting, if anybody else has had that when they wrote things down. She said, "We can't change it because that's how it is written and they entered it."

DP: Yeah: That's unfortunate. That's common, even in the census, all the names are mangled and it's really hard work to figure out who they're trying to refer to because dollars to donuts it was an English-speaking person who couldn't write French names or anybody who had a Cree name, that's not going to happen.

MH: It just says, "Cree woman," something like that. But something that I've just found out on the Pelletier side is about Deborah Pelletier's parents. Her mother was my mother's half-sister because Grandpa Louis married a second time. So, it's funny that her husband was James Pelletier, right? Well, James Pelletier's grandfather and my grandfather, Josué Pelletier were brothers. So, we just discovered that we're related on both sides of the Pelletiers and the Racette side. Here they are brothers.

DP: That's interesting. I know that you were related to Deborah and Joan [Pelletier] and now I know how. Maarsii.

DP: Let's start the formal interview now. It's January 27, 2024 and I am Darren Préfontaine and I am conducting a Road Allowance interview with Margaret Harrison. What do you think of when someone says road allowance?

MH: I have to think about that for a minute, 'cause for us it was just a patch of land by this main road actually. But it's not in some ditch as people have interpreted, but it is a patch of land that becomes your home after. And so, I guess they just claimed it when they came down there. Like I don't even think of that part of it. How did we get here? 'Cause our community was already developed when I was growing up. So, I don't know what the thinking was when they came.

DP: Why is it important we remember the road allowance experience?

MH: Well, it's part of our history. It's part of our culture because we're free people. We seem to feel we can go wherever we wanted to go. I guess that means we're not owned by the government or had to retain what they had to say, we lived by the law of the land but were still free people.

DP: Your mother had several sisters that were talented artisans, who were they? And what did they make?

MH: First one was the older sister, Agnes Paulus. She was a seamstress who sewed Salvation Army uniforms and RCMP uniforms out of Indian Head, where she resided. And then the other one was Aunty Florence Desjarlais, who was definitely a seamstress. She sewed all their clothes, even as they were growing, even as men. Like, she did pretty well all her life.

DP: And that was Bob Wilbert's mom, right?

MH: Yes.

DP: Okay.

MH: Well, there's 14 children in their family, so we're related to the Demeraises, Racettes, Pelletiers, Desjarlaises, Klynes, and Parisiens.

DP: All the prominent families.

MH: Yes, because Auntie Louise, who was one of the children, was married to William John Parisien, who was a veteran. And his son, I think too, was a veteran, I'm not sure. But we had one soldier out of our valley people from within my family. One of my cousins, Ronald Pelletier, was in the forces because I remember he came with his uniform one time, and we were so proud because he came on leave. I was just little then, and somebody in uniform was amazing.

DP: And they were such good-looking guys in their uniforms.

MH: They were, and he was a handsome fellow to begin with. But he married a Parisien girl, which was right in our little community, too. You know, so they were kind of intermarried, but they weren't really relatives, which was kind of good, I guess. (Laughs).

DP: So, basically, everyone in the Road Allowance community were interrelated families.

MH: Yes. Like right to the Pelletier's place, there was another string of Pelletier's actually, which is Jean Pelletier and Joanna, I think her name is. There was a James Pelletier as well but not related to Uncle Jimmy.

DP: So, I'm a bit confused. Some people lived in Katepwa and some lived in Dogtown. Where did you live?

MH: It was probably Dogtown because that was the area there. We lived along the Katepwa Lake on the east side, and yeah, it was Dogtown.

DP: Okay, so that's why you're sort of neighbours with Jim Pelletier's family?

MH: Yeah.

DP: Louis Pelletier dit Racette was your mooshoom. Did he just go by Racette or was he called Pelletier dit Racette?

MH: Well, I think he was more Racette than he was Pelletier. He went more by Racette, and I think that's why Mom and them, like my mother too, all their kids went dit Racette. So, pretty well all of those, the whole 14 would probably be. But then he remarried, so I don't know what those children would be. They wouldn't be dit, like Auntie Delia, and that's Joan and Deborah's mother.

DP: So, they would have just gone straight Racette?

MH: I think so, yes.

DP: Your mooshoom, was he was born a Pelletier? Or how did he become Pelletier dit Racette?

MH: Now Deborah would have more information on this. But it was believed that when his parents or his mother died or something, he just went on to live with his other family and took on their name. It happened to be Racette.

DP: Okay, so he was born s Pelletier but he became a Racette.

MH: I think so, yeah. See, the father was Charles Pelletier. Deborah has that kind of under control there with Charles Pelletier and how they became Racettes after that.

DP: What was special about your mooshoom? I know you had a lot of admiration for him.

MH: Yes I did, but Josué was a quite a quiet man because he was deaf and he was mute. He spoke his language, Michif, but he didn't speak a lot, and I imagine it was his hearing. But that didn't seem to hinder him at all because he got to be known all over the valley, and he was trading fish. He sold fish, berries, rugs, and whatever else they made. And he would trade butter, eggs, whatever, and a lot of bacon, which was what they liked the most because they didn't cure. But he smoked fish. He did a lot of smoked perch. He had a beautiful horse and a buggy that I think he traded for Scrip, or somebody traded him for his Scrip that he had towards Balcarres.

DP: Okay that's interesting. What's your best memories of life on the road allowance?

MH: Well, just the carefreeness of running to the lake. We would be swimming and enjoying the lake. My favourite thing was looking at the rocks and picking up all these beautiful rocks, they were like glass. And then walking in the hills and looking for different plants and flowers.

DP: So, just the general sense of freedom, being tied to the land, enjoying it?

MH: Yes, enjoying the land, and I mean picking berries and things like that. It was just an enjoyable time. I never felt that it was work. It was always seasonal. We lived by the seasons, and so there was work to be done. You just went along and did your work without thinking, but we just enjoyed the outdoors, being by the lake. That was the biggest thing, I think, enjoying the water and what it had to offer. Winter and summer because we ice-fished in the winter. And my mooshoom was a great fisherman out there in the winter. In fact, I have a picture of him fishing on the lake with his dog.

DP: That's a nice picture. Do you have any bad memories? Were there any bad ones about the Road Allowance? And you don't have to share if they bother you.

MH: Yeah, they're quite sad in a way, and you know some of the hardships that the men had. They weren't accepted in certain places, if they happened to go to [beer] parlor in Lebret. They were fighters, and therefore anybody that irritated them in any way, I guess then they would start. It was always sad because I saw the morning after when we'd go to church and pick up grandma or whatever. Those were my uncles and so that was always sad to see.

DP: So, they faced a lot of racism?

MH: I think so when they went to the town, especially the pub things could happen. But otherwise, we had a few sicknesses, I guess. It was hard to take when my sister got burnt by hot water on her back. We're far away from a doctor and Dad had to jump on his horse and run and get a doctor and bring him to her aid right away. My grandmother was the midwife for all of us being born there, but that was a sad time when she got burnt. It sticks out in my mind.

DP: Most of your relatives you mentioned earlier lived on the Road Allowance, right?

MH: Well, Auntie Agnes always lived in Indian Head, that was the daughter. And Auntie Louise always lived in south Qu'Appelle, and the Majors, Auntie Josephine always lived at the farm they owned.

DP: So, they owned their land?

MH: Yeah, they owned their land.

DP: But the other relatives, they were Road Allowance people in different places?

MH: Yes.

DP: What year did you leave the Road Allowance?

MH: In 1952. Yeah, that's when my father passed.

DP: And how did your father pass away, may I ask?

MH: He had an enlarged heart, and he died of the heart stopping, I guess, or bursting, they said.

DP: And that really affected your family traumatically, obviously.

MH: Well, he was a sickly man to begin with, apparently, in his growing up. And he had, I think he had heart problems already, and then he was paralyzed on one side eventually. He must have had a stroke, from what we're thinking, because it was the one side was paralyzed.

So, therefore, he was not happy with himself because he couldn't help. We were quiet in our house. Mother would say, "Don't disturb your father because he's not feeling well right now." We had that understanding that father was not well. But I know in his heart, he would have been heartbroken because he couldn't help her.

DP: How did your mother support your family after his passing? And what gave her, her inner strength? Because she was a real strong woman.

MH: Yes, she was the one that did the work while my father was even here for the last five years or so of his life. It was really hard on her because she had to go for the wood because we had a woodstove. So, it meant hauling water, making sure that we canned enough stuff and all those kinds of things to prepare for winter. And then we had some kind of an allowance that I think was from Mr. LaRocque, when he was part of the Métis Nation down there.

DP: J.-Z.?

MH: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, she got some advice from him. So, when he passed, there was something like \$60 that we got as an extra. That must have been her mother's allowance or whatever they called it then. I'm not sure. But I remember this \$60, plus she would get \$5 or whatever for her family allowance. But that's what she survived on other than different jobs. She worked at the cottages, cleaning, and she worked at the Katepwa hotel, prepping for the kitchen. So, all summer was their work time. She'd be working steady at those places, cleaning and preparing the people for their summer cottages and for the winter closing. And then in the winter, she hooked rugs and went to Motherwell's to sell them. That was her money. Then moving to Estevan when father passed, she had to do a different type of work. She would still do farm cleaning because she got to know different people that were farmers there. But she never worked in the city for anybody. Then she started working for the hunters that came geese hunting.

DP: The Americans?

MH: Yeah. So, she was working with farmers at that point, and of course they were coming across with all these different birds and she would clean and do prepping them for them.

DP: Is there anything else you'd like to share about living on the Road Allowance?

MH: Well, yes, I think for me, I didn't realize that I would be a rug hooker at this time. And for me the culture was quite important down there because of our closeness in the road allowance and we belonged to it. We had our church, Little St. Patrick's Church, where all the Métis met. So culturally, that was quite an important thing for my mother as well, and for her spirituality with the church. So, of course, we were Catholics growing up and still are. And I just have to close my eyes when I'm designing a rug and it just takes me back to the valley. It's very inspirational. It's impressive to think that I left there when I was 11 years old. You always go back there. But something saddens me in the sense that my siblings, there's five of us, they didn't remember their father because they were so young. And so, they grew up without a father. I was fortunate that my older brother and I were the two that had that opportunity.

DP: Okay, Marg. Maarsii. Thank you.

MH: Thank you for the opportunity.

DP: You're welcome.