GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE
of Native Studies and Applied Research

Interview of Elder Norman Fleury
Conducted by David Morin
June 16, 2014

1. **Could you please tell me your name and your home community?**

My name is Norman Fleury, and my home community is St. Lazare, Manitoba. That's where I was born and raised. That's my traditional home. I now live in a small hamlet called Woodnorth, southwest of Virden, Manitoba.

2. **Where have you lived most of your life?**

Well, I've just recently turned 65, and I would say I spent the majority of my childhood and youth at St. Lazare, and then afterwards in Brandon, Manitoba, where I spent a lot of years. I left St. Lazare in 1974, so I would have been about 23 or 24-years-old at that time.

3. **Who were/are your parents and grandparents? Where were they from?**

On my maternal side, my mother was Flora Leclerc. She was born a Leclerc, and then she married a Fleury, and my dad was Bernard Fleury. Some people called him "Barney" Fleury, but he was baptised as Bernard Fleury. My mother's parents were John-Baptiste Leclerc and Flora Lepine or Lepinee, as she preferred. Apparently, that's how her father pronounced it as "Lipinii," and afterwards they pronounced it as Lepine, that's the closest to Lipinii, and some francophone people said Lépine. And then my dad's parents were John Fleury, and his mother was Rose-Anna Vermette. On my mother's side, my mother's dad, John-Baptiste Leclerc was born in St. Charles, just part of Winnipeg today. He grew up around St. Laurent, Manitoba, and left there in the late 1800s to go

to Fort Ellice. There was a mission that was opened up in St. Lazare, and his father-in-law helped Father DeCorby to open up the mission. Then my grandfather and two brothers, Andrew and Joe Leclerc, left St. Laurent with a wagon train with horses and cattle, and then they ended up at Fort Ellice. Then they took homestead at St. Lazare and farmed. Then my dad's dad John Fleury and his grandfather, Edward Fleury left St. François-Xavier to go to Fort Ellice again, and then from there, he met his wife and moved to Ste. Madeleine, Manitoba, which was also an old historical Métis community, Michif community.

4. **How did you spend your life as an adult regarding work, family, or in any other ways you'd like to share? What sorts of jobs did you have?**

When I was a young kid, my mother was a widow, and she raised us as a single parent on a small-scale farm. We had to do a lot of other things in order to survive. Our livelihood was based on a bit of small-scale hunting, a bit of trapping, and there were some fish in the river. We also harvested. We picked berries and we followed the seasons as survival came and engaged in the various types of work that came along. I saw that as a child. My mother would preserve, conserve, and she would make all her jams and jellies, and she canned fruit and meat. It was very pioneer-like. There was still that sense of pioneer in the community where I grew up. My grandfather was my father figure, but he was elderly already. My mother passed away going on four years ago, and she was 108. I grew up as a Michif person. We were in an era when we were losing a lot of our cultural connections as a people. They still talked about the history, and they talked about the Resistance, but in a milder way because it was not

part of the curriculum in the schools, and so we could retain only so much through our oral culture. We were told to live the "modern" or "contemporary" way, and in different ways. I was very fortunate that I grew up with people who were traditionalist in terms of pioneering and lifestyle and social gatherings, and all this pertained to who we were as a people. As a nation, we were Michif. I grew up a Michif, and we never even heard the terminology "Métis" as children. We heard the word *métis* [may-tis] because we lived in a French-Métis community, in a Michif community. So, we heard the term *métis*, and then sometimes, the odd person who would call us "Half-breeds," but then we kind of overlooked that because we knew we weren't. But when you look at the negotiations with government which pertain to land in terms of scrip, they refer to the Michif people as "Half-breeds." So, it was documented that way. It was just a misconception of whom the people were because to this day, people really still don't know who we are as a people. I mean now at least it's becoming documented through different existing programs. We're able to say to people that this is who we are, but we are still struggling, too. I don't know if it's convincing, but it seems to be that we're trying to convince the general population that we were a people that weren't First Nations and we were a people that weren't European, and we struggled and survived. We developed through the contact of two specifically strong nations, the French and the Cree, where we have our language, which we call Michif. The linguists have studied and researched and are convinced that this language is so special because it's one of the only languages, if not the only language that's taken from two family groups that become one language. They are flabbergasted that the language is separated by the nouns in French with its associated grammar and the verbs in Cree with its associated grammar. They can't believe it, but specifically, one

person by the name of Peter Bakker—he's the person that I have a lot of praise and respect for—because he not only studied the language, but he also studied and researched the special people that speak this language. These people have their own history, they had their own legends, they had their own music, they had their own stories, and they had their own traditional knowledge. They made major contributions to the development of the West and to the country. Those were the Michif people. They were translators and interpreters, and they were also people that worked with government. My family, the names that I've mentioned, both paternal and maternal, have had a lot to do with the promotion of who we are as a people, and they've also had a lot to do with the development of the country and they were also involved in both Resistances. And they continue, as I and others try to portray the right image of who we are as a people, as Michif people, and how we survived, and that we're survivors. For myself, I think where it all began was with my grandparents, because my grandparents were orators. They were storytellers. They knew who they were. They had a real firm grip of who they were. They didn't experience too much racism because they were a people who already knew who they were. My grandparents and their generation, very few of them ever went to school. We're now talking about education. If you're talking about academics, it had very little to do with the survival of my families, because they were in an era where the buffalo hunting was one of the major industries, and I always say that my people were the "buffalo people." They were the people who lived in that era and they survived. They were that kind of people, but when I went to school, my grandfather (my mother's father) believed that education would be the future tool for survival, because the traditional ways were already going by the wayside. Where my grandmother would say, "Well let him sleep. *Kiiyaam ka*

nipow, kitimaakishiw. He's pitiful. Let him sleep. He's young. He can make a living like you." My grandfather said, "No, those days are coming to an end now. All that cutting fence posts, selling to farmers, and cord wood, and trapping, and all these ways of surviving, living off the land." So, grandfather said, "Let them go to school." I had an opportunity to go to university, it was a special mature program called Impact, similar to SUNTEP and BUNTEP at Brandon University. So, I took that opportunity and then from there on, I used that as a stepping stone to do other things. But I've always had something giving to me through my visions. I guess in life, I've always strived for something better all the time. It's not that the mechanisms were really tough, they were, because you had to relocate, you had to live sometimes in urban settings such as Brandon. When you were talking about culture, there are certain things, such as cultural shock, because you're living more in an environment where you're very accustomed to surviving. You're protected by your environment. When you have to go to a new environment, which you can't preconceive in your mind, something as simple as basic living changed. My mother never lived in an urban larger centre until she moved with me to Brandon, which was a heavily built urban centre with a different culture. So, I think when I went to school, I was well equipped traditionally because I had my language. I knew who I was, and I had no identity problem. I was always told at home— by my mom and my grandparents, my maternal grandparents especially because that's only who I grew to know—"Hold your head up. Look ahead. Be proud of who you are, and don't let anyone knock you down because there's no reason why, because you should know who are as a person. You should know who you are as a Michif person, and be proud of who you are, because you're no different than anybody else. There are other nationalities, but

we're as important as those other nationalities." That's the way it is. Have a positive image, a positive world view of yourself and of the rest of the world. And understanding others, but there are comparisons, even to this day. I guess I can talk about the work that I've done. After I went to university, I went farming, because I farmed with a good friend of mine, and he passed away in 1990. I always had my heart in the land. I was always a person that loved to farm, and I loved being out with the animals, with cattle and horses, and pigs and poultry. It's something I still love today. I think there's something in a person's life that forces you to make a choice to do certain things. If you like that stuff, it never leaves you. So, I went farming and I used to have a lot of cattle, but I remember my neighbour calling me the "Cattle Baron of Woodnorth" because I had over 200 head of cattle. I used to raise horses for the PMU farmers. So, I'd sell studs. I'd buy open mares and breed them and sell the pregnant mares to these PMU farmers because it was the pregnant mare urine that they were collecting for the Premarin. They'd make some pharmaceutical things for women and also for other drugs. So I did that in the latter years of my life, but prior to that, I farmed with cattle and grain, but sometimes things don't really work out, because everything's based on the economy and then the BSE struck and different things struck, so I continued to live where I am, on a small-scale, and I still have quite a few horses and stuff, but I will always love that. I'll always be a person who will live out on the land, and I love nature. I love hunting. I like going out berry picking and I still like making jams, and I still love making homemade things like bannock and homemade bread. We used to make our own butter. When people come to my place who are of Métis ancestry or are Michif, I like to entertain them in the traditional way because that's how you retain a lot of your foods and your

customs. So I entertain. I love entertaining, and I'll bake and I'll make traditional things like *lii boolets*, *lii bayngs*, and *la gaalet*. Sometimes, we'll have *lii gortoons*, which are cracklings. These are foods that people really appreciate. A few years ago, I had a traditional New Year's dinner. Since the main tradition of the Métis or Michif was New Year's, I figured I'd entertain and invite a few people who still remembered how we grew up. And other things too, like my uncle, my mom's brother William LeClair, and his family, Clara, my aunt Clara. I learned all the dances at their place, because they were the ones that still knew all the old tunes. My aunt Clara had brothers and cousins who were Phillip Genaille and Dave Genaille. They would teach us the old tunes. They'd say, "This tune is for this …" and they'd have things like the "Rabbit Dance," the "Duck Dance," "Drops of Brandy," and square dances, and we learned how to call, and we learned how to jig. I'm very thankful of those people. I'm trying to portray an image of the Michif people, like my grandfather still sang the old voyageur songs and the songs that the old Michif put together, like Pierre Falcon songs, including the Battle Seven Oaks song. They had other songs. They had wedding songs and they had war songs. We had such a vivid, strong culture which I grew up in. I'm very, very fortunate. I'm very thankful that I did so because it's my turn to try to help people have an understanding of who they are in terms of taking pride in themselves and in their Michif identity.

5. **What do you enjoy about being Métis?**

I just love being a Michif person because I feel so secure in growing up and knowing who I am and who I was. It's a challenge sometimes, but on the other hand, I'm well equipped for this challenge in terms of telling the world who we

are as a people. We have that opportunity now because, as a person who has done a lot of work for the Gabriel Dumont Institute and me being employed with GDI, there will be opportunities to talk about the Michif people, and about their knowledge, stories, and history. We are also putting it in books and in children's books, and we also making it part of the curriculum whereby we equip ourselves to help others understand who we are. I've always been a very, very happy person in knowing who I am. And if there are people who are asking questions just for the sake of wanting to be racist, I challenge that also. I challenge it not in anger. I don't use anger to explain things about who we are. I use it as a challenge to portray the true image of who we are, and I try to be quite explanatory about it, to explain it in such terms that people can see it and will appreciate it. Most people that I talk to about who we are as a nation and as Michif people, say, "Wow! I didn't realize you had such stories and you know so much!" I feel good when I get those kinds of responses. It gives me adrenaline, and it lights a fire in the person I am talking to, making them want to know more. Sometimes, though, there are obstacles that can get in your way, where you say, "If we had more money we could do more of this and more of that."

6. **I guess you've talked about some of the challenging things that you've faced. What is the most important thing that you want others to know about the Métis?**

My target is to expand the knowledge and pride of the Métis people, the Michif people. I would like our people to have this opportunity today. We can build on what I know and what other elders know and what other speakers know in terms of the traditional knowledge of who the Métis are and what we were, what

we had, what we still have and build on that so we can have an archive of all this knowledge. We have and we can portray this through our museums. Try to build things like the GDI museum and some of the things that are in St. Boniface that portray the images of Michif people. We talk about what are land claims and what is scrip, and then what is the language, and what is the history, and what are the stories, and what are the legends, what are the songs. If we could just touch the computer and say, "Michif culture" and we'd be able find it there. Okay, now, "The Michif language, what is that?" And then, you'd get, "Michif, *lii koonts*, like the legends, what are those?" Then you talk about the spiritual ceremonies, which are part of the culture. You have *lii roogaroo*, you have the different stories, and you look at those legends and stories, and you look at the mythology, and you can talk about those kinds of things. And then they'd say, "Traditional knowledge, okay. What is that? What is traditional knowledge?" It's basically having that strong cultural component that you have in your contemporary way of living, but you can also access who your people were and who you can be, and how you can use this culture for today. You can say, "Well, I'm going to dissect this and I'm going to take the best of it, and I'm going to apply that to my everyday life." If I have children, I want them to learn things about who the Métis were, the Michif. I'm able to say, "Okay you have a child or grandchild or even yourself whom maybe went through residential school or you never learned, or you were adopted out and all of the sudden, oh apparently this is what I am, but what am I?" So, you're able to find out who are. So you have a stronger people that know who they are and where they come from. So they, in turn, can make contributions and make comparisons because I think you have to have some sort of an identity, a positive identity so you can overcome all these prejudices, the racism. So you

can have a strong foothold about everything in life, about who the Métis people, who the Michif people are. And going to "Back to Batoche" is a very positive, because when people go there, they go there to find things about themselves. GDI has all these things, and I've made reference to that many, many times. I have a sister who lives in North Battleford and her children and grandchildren want to know who they are. It's sad when I had a niece phone me from Toronto and ask me, "Uncle, who are we?" And when people phone you at 1 o'clock in the morning and they're upset and they are confused about certain things, and they're looking to answer that question, "Who am I?" "Who are we? Mom never told us." You have those kinds of questions, and you say to yourself, "I guess there is a lot of work for me to do." Because I have to help my niece and I have to help the general population, the Métis specifically, but then you have those others that don't know who we are. We have a lot of work to do. So ,it's quite a challenge, but it's really worth it. It's worth it because every minute of my time and my life, I can't help but revisit and then when I go out interviewing elders, wow. It's so nice to talk to people that have a foundation of who they were, but they are also confused about how they can apply that. How can they help their grandchildren? Because some of them will say, "It's no use, it's gone, you know?" And I hate hearing that. I say, "No, it's not gone! We've got it. We've still got it. We just have to put it out there for everybody else."

7. **If you were advising yourself as a Métis youth, knowing what you know now, what would you tell yourself in a sentence or two?**

Well, this is what I would tell myself, but in telling myself, I would also be saying this to other youth: "Always take pride in yourself, do this through your family, your language, your history, and continue to share and teach the

importance of nationhood, and knowing who you are." That's so important. This is what this person was looking for when they asked, "Who are we?" If you could answer that question, I think it applies to everyday life. I think that's so important. Another thing I would say is, "Let us not ever go underground as a nation again as we had done in the past because of persecution, because it has been too great a penalty for us as a nation." As soon as we went underground, we collectively lost a sense of knowing who we were because for a hundred years it disappeared, and now after more than a hundred years, you're trying to regain pride, culture, knowledge, and understanding to build on that so you have a foundation for who you are as a people. One thing that we're very fortunate as Métis or Michif people is that we would have lost our culture and language completely if there had not been people like my family and other families who didn't totally go underground. They still retained and they valued and also passed these things on. And they passed it on too. I spoke to some of my family members on the phone yesterday, including my sister who's going to be 70, and then I have a sister that's 89. We seem to always make reflections of our past because now they have grandchildren and children that are looking for their genealogy. They're looking at who their ancestors were and how they had connection to the land, how they had connection as a people and as a nation because even now our own political organizations have their own views about who the people are, so we're saying, "Well we know who we are." We were Métis before political organizations came to be. We were Michif and we had our stories before organizations came to be. Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont and their people knew who they were or they wouldn't have fought for what they called their rights. My grandfather used to say they were protecting their rights, *lii drway*. Those are rights, and when they said, "*lii drway*," the rights.

That was really what they were fighting for, and one of them was land, because without a land base you have no livelihood. Then they were protecting the environment. They were protecting everything. We were so close to nature it's unbelievable. Everything we did; our beliefs, our ceremonies, our understanding of the land, our understanding of the birds, the land, botany, the medicines, all those things that our people knew, brought us close to nature. Some of them, we still have today, but we still say, "How can we bring it all together to be who we are as a people today?" To make it very cohesive, something that's consistent, and pooling these things, so we don't have to go for the next hundred years to explain to people. It would be nice to see that once and for all, when you say the Métis or the Michif, people would know who they are.

Instead, they're saying, "Well are you Treaty? Do you belong to a band? Do you pay taxes?" You know those kinds of things. There are still those questions. They don't know the real Michif, the real Métis, and that's what I would like them to know someday. I know you'll have those questions. You'll still have those questions because we have immigrants coming to this country constantly. Now where are they going to learn? Some of this has to be in school, part of the curriculum, because they're not going to come to our celebrations. They're not going to come, not many of them, and they're not going to know who we are. I tried explaining to some of my friends that I have, Asian friends, and other people and they say, "Well who are you?" It's hard to say we're of Indian ancestry because they think it's Indian from India, so you have to talk about the North American Indian and it's not Indian anymore. It's the First Nations people, and then you have the terminology that's Aboriginal and then you have terminology of the people of the land, and then you have the Métis and some

Half-breeds, and you have Michif, and then you have *métis*. It's very, very difficult. We have a lot of work to do and it's quite a task. And we're going to do it because we're developing a mechanism all the time to have a base to work from, and we're teaching, because you have to do it in the work environments. You have to have that Michif word of the day, and you have to say, "Hello! *Taanishi*! *Boon zhoo*!" when you're answering the phone. It's got to be part of the workplace. It's got to be part of every day life. I know I stayed at my niece's place, and there were two kids having breakfast and there was her husband and herself, and they said, "You know, we should have the Michif word of the day," because they wanted to know. They asked me. Everywhere I go, people ask, "What do you do? What is your job?" "Well, I'm the coordinator of Michif language and administrator of cultural programs," and they say, "Well, what does that mean?" Then you have to explain to people what you're trying to do, and it's not easy but we're saying, "Look it, we have a vision, and we're going to try to meet the mandate of what we think we have to do in order to make things better in the work environment, but not only that specifically, but also to help the general public about who we are." I'm very proud to be a Michif person and speak my language. *Biikishkwaan li Michif, aen Michif niiya pii aan Michif biikishkwaan*. This means, "I'm a Michif and I speak Michif." There's not a day that goes by that I don't have reflect upon my grandparents, specifically my maternal grandparents because without them, I probably would be like those other people that are lost and trying to look for something tangible so they can be comfortable. *Maarsii*.

Thank you very much.