



# GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE

of Native Studies and Applied Research

Interview of Elder Joe Welsh  
Conducted by Darren Préfontaine  
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**Could you please tell me your name and your home community and where you were born?**

I am Joe Welsh and my home community is Lebret, Saskatchewan in the Qu'Appelle Valley. I was born in a hospital in Balcarres. We lived in Lebret. A lot of families lived in Lebret, and there were 15 children in my family. My older brother Danny was the first one born in the hospital, and I was the second. I lived in Lebret until Grade 2. Our mother died in 1950, and in 1953, the seven youngest of us were sent to an orphanage in Prince Albert—a Catholic orphanage—St. Patrick's Orphanage, and we spent eight years there. We lived on the Métis Farm (in Lebret) and then we moved to the road allowance on the south side of the valley where the old cemetery used to be. [*Was that Jackrabbit Street?*] No, Jackrabbit Street was down along Mission Lake. [*So this was Little Chicago?*] No we didn't have a name. We were just families living together. There were maybe 20 families who lived up there along the road allowance. We kind of had our own little community. [Were there a lot of extended families?] Yes, there were. I remember Walt, my dad's brother, Norbert. There were two Welsh families, but there were also LaRocques, Jeannottes, and [?].

**Where did you live most your life?**

There were eight years in the orphanage. Then I moved back with our father, me and my sisters, and we lived in Regina. I finished grade 11 there, and then I quit school. I then had a series of jobs, and I believe it was 1967 when I joined the army and lived out of province for three years. I then came back to Regina, and I have lived there most of the time with breaks living in LaRonge. I lived up at Maria [Campbell]'s place on the river for a while. Then back to Lebret for a while, but most of the time it was in Regina.

**Who were your parents and grandparents and where were they from?**

My father and mother were Joseph and Marion Welsh, and they were from the valley. My mother was an Amyotte, that's another Métis family from the valley. On the Welsh side, my grandfather was François-Xavier Welsh, and my grandmother was Véronique Welsh, and they lived in the valley. Norbert Welsh [the "Last Buffalo Hunter"] and Cecile Boyer are my great-grandparents on the Welsh side.

**How did you spend your life as an adult regarding work, family and other ways you would like to share?**

After I quit school, I had a series of jobs. I was anything from an appliance serviceman;

I worked in an eviscerating factory; I worked for farmers, and then I joined the army. I joined the Royal Canadian Corps of Engineers, and I was in the army for four years in Chilliwack, Edmonton, and Valcartier, Quebec. I got out of the army after my four-year commitment was up. I came back to Regina and got a job as a corrections officer at the jail in Regina. I lasted six months there. The only difference between me and the guys in there was they got caught. Then I got a job at social services for 14 years and then I didn't want to do that any more, so I left there and worked at friendship centres, various places as a consultant do this and do that. I haven't had steady employment since 1986 or '87 or so. I was a bartender a few different places. I was a writer in residence in La Ronge. [When did you become a writer and playwright roughly?] I attended the summer school of the arts at Fort San, and it was kind of by accident really. I went to an event with one of my sisters that went there and met some old people and they said, "Oh you're Joe and Marian Welsh's boy?" That's how it got going and I collected snippets of information on her; stories and stuff like that. I took a real fine interest in her over the years. So, during the eight years in the orphanage, three of our grandparents died. I lost the language [Michif] because of those eight years—something I would never recover. I missed out on people like Ed. St. Pierre and Harriet [Oaks-St. Pierre] and what I recovered was just so minuscule in terms of the knowledge and the lore that is available to us. I plan on talking to some of these people because they know a lot. Gerald [St. Pierre] knows people from my place and the others know people who have since died who were either their friends or family. I'll never recover fully what I lost, but just knowing some of the people, and knowing who they were and what they did would provide me with personal satisfaction, to know where I come from. [So, the writing, with all the colourful vignettes, that was a form for you of cultural recovery as well?] Yes, I didn't plan it like that, but I said to myself, "Holy Cripe! I got something here!" The stories in my little book are just parts of bigger stories, and I missed the bigger story. I'm not going to say that I am obsessed with it, but it bothers me sometimes. Holy Moses, if my mother hadn't died, all of this would have been available to me and to my brothers and sisters who also spent time in the orphanage. [*And all her descendants.*] Yeah, exactly.

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

I have two little pearls of wisdom. There is somebody, it could have been Dick Gregory or Mort Sahl. They were American comedians and we used to see them on the Ed Sullivan Show, our window for the world after we got television. One of them said, "Depression plus time equals humour." We used to watch them on Ed Sullivan, and there were lots of other comedians like Bob Hope and Milton Berle and all those guys who could set up jokes. And these are the guys that talked about work, family kinds of things and running away from grandma because she would kick the switch and stuff like that and you know how to make a big meal out of practically nothing and our

mothers and sisters were good cooks because they had to make the stuff so that we could eat it and I related to them guys. A lot of there stuff was really harsh, hard line political stuff because Gregory got involved in the Civil Rights movement in the States. I don't know what year it what was, but all of a sudden, he wasn't popular on television anymore. All those entertainment shows stopped showing him and the same with Mart Sahl. Mort Sahl was a Jew and Dick Gregory was black; they know something about oppression. But they found the humour there. Again, someone said to me, "It's our similarities that make us civilized and it's our differences that make us interesting." That means everybody, me in particular, meeting these people here in relation to... Okay. I'll give you the roogaroo story: I know two, and there are 10 of them now. I don't know how many, but people from different communities have a different take on them, and that's interesting. Nobody's ever said to me, "Well that wrong. It didn't happen this way. It happened this way because it happened to me. But see, there's a point where we can both be interested in each other's story. You prepare your stories and how they grow, including the meaning of the words and all that kind of stuff. That's what I've learned, and what I know is again like a tiny part of the whole body of knowledge.

### **What's been the most challenging thing about being Métis?**

I think that when people, given the opportunity, used to be interesting, and they would say, "Holy Mosses, this is good stuff we are talking about. This is something for me to learn." Then they refuse to learn, "Oh it didn't happen that way." "Well, because it didn't happen to you, doesn't mean it didn't happen." That's where it's a conversation killer because there's nothing to talk about anymore. There are lot of others and personal things, and that kind of stuff. But now at this stage of my life, I like to be around interesting people. [*You'd have met the people who don't honour and celebrate the diversity experience of Métis.*] Yeah, well not only Métis, but anything because a good, interesting conversation can lead anywhere, but it will always come back as something that belongs to us as Métis people. For some reason, that is better off, I think. No, I can't include anyone's attitude. I can only include mine, and so continue to suffer I guess

### **What is the most important thing you want others to know about the Métis?**

All of our history in Saskatchewan is tied to Riel, Dumont, and Batoche, and that was a major historical occurrence, but each of us here is from a different community. We have our own stories, and our own history. There is the saying that "The oppressors write the official histories, but the histories of the oppressed are more true, and probably a hell of a lot more interesting." And well you know the rest.

**If you were advising yourself as a Métis youth looking back at when you were young boy maybe in the orphanage or maybe as a young man, knowing what you know now what would you tell yourself in a sentence or two?**

I will defer to an elder who once told me," The Constitution don't define me, the Métis Society don't define me, nobody defines me. My village, my family, and my ancestors define me and that is the beginning of self government. You can't have self government without knowing where you come from who you are and being able to govern yourself." Leonard Pambrun said that.