

Senator Thelma Villeneuve Chalifoux. (b. 1929)

Thelma Villeneuve Chalifoux is the first Metis woman to be appointed to the Senate of Canada. Thelma was born at Calgary, Alberta in 1929, the daughter of Paul Michel Villeneuve (b.c. 1892) and, Helene Ingwersen, a Danish-American. Her parents met when her dad was breaking broncs on the Burns ranch near Calgary, where her mother worked as a cook. Thelma is part of a family that goes back to Alberta's early Metis roots. Her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, Paul, François¹ and Severe Villeneuve², and grandmother Julia Boucher, were from the early Metis strongholds of St. Albert and Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta. Military service ran in the family and Thelma's father fought in both World Wars. Thelma joined the reserves and worked in a Salvation Army canteen during the Second World War. Her siblings served in the Canadian Army and Navy.



Thelma's experience as a single mother raising seven children (she now has 30 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren) has given her a deep interest in women's issues. At age 25, her abusive husband abandoned her. With only a grade nine education, she raised her children, returned to school, and completed courses at the Chicago School of Interior Design, the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology Construction and Estimating, and Lethbridge Community College/Sociology. She was the first Aboriginal woman to broadcast on commercial radio with CKXL Radio Peace River. She has developed community groups in northern Alberta, specializing in Native housing, for the Metis Housing Corporation and the Alberta Housing Corporation.

In 1994, she founded and became Senior Partner of Chalifoux and Associates Educational and Economic Consulting, specializing in the development and application of Metis specific cross-cultural training courses. She owns Secret Gardens Originals, which sells crafts and floral designs. She has served as Vice-President of the Aboriginal Women's Development Corporation and was the first Metis woman ever appointed to the Senate of the University of Alberta.

She has been an active member of the Metis Nation of Alberta since 1961. She was the first Métis woman to receive a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 1994, and the first Metis woman to be appointed to the University of Alberta Senate. She was the first Métis to chair the National Métis Senate and the Senate Constitution Commission, Co-chair of the Alberta Métis Senate, an Appeal Panel Member with Alberta Family and Social Services, and a Métis Elder for Nechi Institute.

¹ François Villeneuve dit la Fourche was the son of Augustin Villeneuve and Marguerite Clement

² Severe Villeneuve was born circa 1854 at Edmonton, the son of François Villeneuve dit la Fourche and Helene Vallee. In 1873 he married Nancy Courteoreille, daughter of Jacques Courteoreille and Marie Hamelin. On January 12, 1891 at St. Albert he married Julie Boucher, the daughter of Thomas Boucher and LaRose Gladu (b. Lac St. Anne). Thomas was born circa 1835 at Lac St. Anne, the son of Joseph Boucher and Marguerite Dupuis.

Chalifoux served as a Land Claims Negotiator, was a founder of the Slave Lake Native Friendship Centre, was instrumental in developing the Métis Association of Alberta Land and Welfare Departments. She devoted several years to Alberta Native Communications Society, and was a determined social activist at the height of the community development movement with the Company of Young Canadians. She was appointed to the Canadian Senate in 1997. In 2004, at age 75, she faced mandatory retirement. She is now the patron and director of the Michif Cultural Institute in St. Albert, an organization devoted to the history and education of the Métis. It has initiated a collection of Métis specific items as well as a pictorial history, and works to protect, preserve and promote the Métis of St. Albert and Alberta. Thelma was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Law Degree from the University of Toronto, June 15, 2004.

Thelma was an active participant in the Manitoba Metis Federation's Metis Elders Conference of 1991. She made the summary comments for her Elders group at the closing of this conference. Her remarks are published on pages 203-207 in *Past Reflects the Present: The Metis Elders Conference* (Fred Shore and Lawrence Barkwell [Eds.] Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation, 1997).



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