

Donna Fuhr—Parks Canada Interview, Feb 15, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): This is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Donna Fuhr for the Parks Canada Fort Battleford project. Hello Donna, how are you?

Donna Fuhr (DF): Good, fine. Thank you.

DP: Could you please tell me your name and home community?

DF: Donna Fuhr, and I'm from North Battleford, Saskatchewan.

DP: Who were your parents and grandparents and where were they from?

DF: Okay, my parents and grandparents were from ... My father was from Manitoba, Portage la Prairie and my mom was from Camrose, Alberta.

DP: Okay and what were their family names?

DF: My dad was a McLeod from Manitoba and my mom was Jorgum, J-O-R-G-U-M.

DP: And where, uh, where is the Métis ancestry? From the McLeods?

DF: McLeods, right.

DP: Okay. Did they have roots in Manitoba originally, in the Red River, your father's family?

DF: Yes, yes.

DP: Okay, did anybody in your family speak Michif or serve in the military?

DF: My uncle, my dad's older brother was in the military in the First World War.

DP: Okay.

DF: He died in Vimy Ridge in 1917.

DP: Okay. And nobody speaks Michif then I guess? Their language probably would have been English and Cree?

DF: Yes, I think so. This would be my great-grandfather, he came from Scotland.

DP: Okay.

DF: Immigrated with the Hudson's Bay Company. It was back in the 1800s, sometime in the 18—I'm thinking sometime around the early 1830s, somewhere around there. He came over and he worked as a bowsman on the Mackenzie River. And he worked with the Hudson's Bay and then he met his wife, my grandma, Cree probably.

DP: Okay.

DF: And they would have come along the Mackenzie River and delivered supplies to all the forts along the Mackenzie River.

DP: Okay.

DF: And then he drowned.

DP: Okay.

DF: And, they had three children at that time and my great-grandmother would have gone back to I believe Winnipeg to the fort there. And the Hudson's Bay Company looked after her and helped her with her children.

DP: Yep.

DF: And she remarried later on.

DP: So did she marry a McLeod?

DF: This is her first marriage; her first marriage was a McLeod.

DP: Her first marriage was a McLeod so she kept the McLeod name.

DF: She remarried later on. She married an O'Donnell, an Irish fellow.

DP: Okay, okay. And your, her children kept the McLeod name, they weren't, and that's how your father kept that name.

DF: Yes, my father kept that name right. My grandfather right.

DP: Did you identify as Métis growing up?

DF: No.

DP: It's just something you found about later or, or it's just...

DF: I was adopted so I didn't know about that until much later in life.

DP: Okay, so something your father never talked about.

DF: No. I was adopted so I had a different family.

DP: Oh okay.

DF: So they never let me know about that. But they died, both parents died, my adopted parents, when I was 35. So then, I started searching for my birth parents and I didn't find them until I was about 50 I believe.

DP: Okay.

DF: They were close to an adoption agency and they were married to each other, my parents were married to each other.

DP: And they were Métis?

DF: My dad is Métis.

DP: Your dad was. Your biological father.

DF: My biological father is Métis.

DP: And okay, so you just discovered that later in life so you wouldn't have encountered any racism specifically for being Métis or ...

DF: No, no.

DP: What Métis families do you remember living near you or growing up near you?

DF: None, absolutely none.

DP: So you were raised with mainly non-Métis, non-Aboriginal people?

DF: Right. Icelandic and English. My adopted mother was Icelandic and my father was English so pretty close to really what, because I think my father, George McLeod he didn't, he wouldn't even acknowledge that he was Métis. He wouldn't acknowledge that you know.

DP: Yep. Yeah, that's quite common.

DF: Of course it is, yeah it is.

DP: So you know to escape racism or whatever.

DF: Right, the Indians were looked down upon you know so. He was from St. Marks, Manitoba. Like around Portage la Prairie.

DP: Okay.

DF: It's a Métis community. It would have been Cree I do believe.

DP: So your father, your biological father, did you have like a meeting with him, a reconciliation or did he pass on before you discovered this?

DF: Oh I met him but he was ill when I met him but I still, he had colon cancer so when I met him he was still pretty good then when I met him. But then he got Alzheimer's later on, after the surgery I believe.

DP: Yes. Okay.

DF: He was eighty something anyway. He was 80 when he had his surgery so ...

DP: And he passed on.

DF: And he passed on, yeah.

DP: Did he share anything with you about your family's history and traditions?

DF: No, but I have a half-sister in Manitoba.

DP: And she shares with you?

DF: She shares with me.

DP: So you've learned a fair bit about the family?

DF: Yes, yes.

DP: Your father didn't identify as Métis so did your step-sister, does your step sister?

DF: I don't know really. I think she was surprised when we started looking at family history she realized she had Métis blood on both sides, you know.

DP: Okay.

DF: And yeah, I think it is upsetting for her you know.

DP: That it wasn't shared with her earlier.

DF: Well just, yeah because her dad never acknowledged that, that he was Métis. And I don't think they realized, I think everybody at that time just tried avoiding being Indian of any sort right.

DP: Yeah.

DF: Tried to raise their, you know, I think both her family has Métis blood because we're in the Red River Settlement. We're going to have Métis blood.

DP: What does it mean to you to have rediscovered your Métis heritage?

DF: I don't know. At first, I was upset with it, but now I don't care. I'm embracing it, like it's fine. It is what I am at the end of the day. Yeah, it is what I am; it's part of my heritage and I'm just interested in learning about it. I've learned because I work at a gallery, and it's with Native people, it's a First Nations gallery, so I learn more and more, but I learn more and more. A lot of people come in and people are starting to acknowledge that they're Métis. And I think it's better now. Like I think they're getting the respect that they need, and people with Métis ancestry are being successful at what they do and I think that helps.

DP: So definitely you've acquired a pride and a knowledge to learn more.

DF: That's right and you have to be proud of who ever you are, no matter what you are at the end of the day it doesn't matter. You know, you're just people right?

DP: Yeah.

DF: And, if I have Métis ancestry then I guess I do. That's what it is. I'm Norwegian and I embrace that too you know? And my Scottish history and I think I have some Welsh history too way back when as well. But I'm proud because my grandfather was one of the fur, he came over in the 1800s and he's part of Canada right?

DP: Well he definitely beat all the farmers that came here in the late 19th and early 20th century.

DF: That's right.

DP: You know, so he definitely was a builder of Canada. And there are a lot of Métis McLeods.

DF: Yes, there's a whole bunch of them. I mean just because of the Scottish Clearances at that time. People had to leave Scotland and, they were forced off the land whether to Australia or to, oh I don't know all over the place. A lot of them to the States as well as to Canada, of course you know, with the Hudson's Bay Company. And I'm proud that my great-great-grandfather worked for the Hudson's Bay Company and helped to open the West you know, and was part of that. And they were around at the time of Louis Riel as well. I think my grandfather was around during the time of the Louis Riel Rebellion. And he was a boy in Winnipeg at that time. I have documentation that the talks about it at that time. I've got some information from other family members. And Yeah, they were pioneers in the country and it's interesting to read my great-grandfather's letters about how much they travelled back then. He was a roughrider so he'd go down to the States to Oregon. He'd ride all the way down to Oregon, pick up horses and sell them to farmers, and work for the railroad. And did all sorts of different things to get employment to raise his family right? Yeah so it's interesting many years back.

DP: Is there anything about your Métis ancestry other than your, your grandfather, the patriarch coming here and making a life of the fur trade that you find really interesting? Anything that jumped out at you?

DF: I don't know. I can't think of, just that. I think everybody struggled at that time. But they had been given good opportunity like scrip land and things like that. I think they were, it was just a tough time I think for everybody at that time. Not just the Métis people but other people as well. Pioneers in a different country, of course, it's difficult right. People died and got sick and I think with the culture of it, my adopted parents, her dad is from Iceland and her dad died.

DP: Okay.

DF: You know after a couple years of being here. So then my grandmother had to raise four children alone. You know, so it was tough for everybody right?

DP: Yeah.

DF: Yeah, so ...

DP: Yeah everyone says the "good old days," but I mean people generally didn't live that long and they had lots of kids and a lot of the kids never made it to adulthood.

DF: Yeah, my grandmother did. Like my Icelandic grandmother. I think it depends a lot on your background and how you were raised in your own country that you came from too you know? To have that structure there in order to, like the Germans have a very solid structure when they come to Canada. A lot of the other countries, you know?

DP: Very, very orderly.

DF: Orderly Yeah, orderly fashion. I don't know if the Métis had as much of that. Like they came from Scotland and they had nothing really in Scotland either right at the end of the day.

DP: No, no.

DF: It was a really poor, poor country. I think the mix with the Native people that were here right at that time, so I think it was a whole cultural change for everybody you know?

DP: Is there anything in this partnership or anything at Parks Canada at the site at Fort Battleford that needs improvement in terms of Métis interpretation? Is there anything you would like to see Parks Canada do at Fort Battleford that would increase awareness of Métis history and culture?

DF: I don't think so. I think they do a pretty good job I think already you know?

DP: Okay.

DF: They have to explain to people that Métis culture is a mix blood culture so not necessarily French or Indian. It's also Scottish and Irish and English and whatever other country you know?

DP: You find that most of the stuff relating to Métis relates to French-Métis more than say...?

DF: It does. Mixed blood is any mixed blood right with Indian right?

DP: Yeah. So you find it's definitely—

DF: As long as you're Métis, culture, it's not French period. Yeah, I think I know a few people like that said, "Well no, I'm not Métis because well I said..." Yeah this is who you are because but you know.

DP: Just different kinds of Métis?

DF: Pardon me?

DP: Just different kinds of Métis?

DF: It's just called Métis, that's all it is. It's mixed blood, that's Métis.

DP: Well everybody now is part of the same community. At one time, there definitely were distinctions you know, Protestant, Catholic, English-speaking, French-speaking, but now it's the same community because everybody speaks English and families intermarried. Like you might have Scottish Métis ancestry on the mom's side and French Métis ancestry on the dad's side.

DF: Or whatever, yeah.

DP: Everyone is so intermixed now it's just one community.

DF: Yeah that's right. A global village that's all we are now right? I mean in the end of the day you know?

DP: Yeah.

DF: Yeah because I have Norwegian that they, Yeah, it's just always interesting to go back a little bit and look around and see what they have been up to in Manitoba where my dad grew up. And I think my dad was a guide around Lake Manitoba you know, where he grew up? So that was part of their income. And I've been back there because they have a lodge and hunting lodge and they hunt chickens, you know like partridge and that? And they bring, when my dad was young, they'd bring hunters from the States okay, and he'd bring them as a guide and they'd do a lot of hunting.

DP: So in a sense—

DF: And game, little game, right?

DP: In a sense, he was doing a lot of the same things Métis people traditionally did.

DF: That's right.

DP: It's just that he didn't identify for reasons to protect himself against racism.

DF: Yeah, and I think when he met my mother too, you know, he was married to somebody else at the time and then they moved way right? So he wanted to just leave that behind him I think, that Métis heritage.

DP: Okay.

DF: But he clearly had Indian blood in him, clearly. I mean you know, look at him, you could tell. He was a good-looking man, very good-looking man, but he was never proud of that Indian heritage. Which is kind of sad you know?

DP: Well, a product of his time.

DF: That's right. And it was.

DP: Now no one really cares. But at his time that could have made the difference between making a living for your family.

DF: They lived in Calgary for many years too you know? Yeah.

DP: Is there anything else you would like to share about?

DF: No, I think that's all.

DP: Okay, well I thank you for that. It was nice to talk to you and I'll conclude the interview but I just have a few house keeping things for you Donna.

DF: Okay.

DP: Thanks again. The interview itself, we hope to transcribe it in a couple months, once I have it transcribed, I'm going to work with some of our students here to do it. I will send a copy to you, and you will have the right to approve or take out anything you don't want in the interview. And that copyright release form that you signed at the meeting spells out what it's for. Basically it's going to be for interpretation at Fort Battleford.

DF: Oh cool.

DP: And it's going to be used likely for the Gabriel Dumont Institute *Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture*. We'll just add it to our online oral history collection. And yeah, so if you have any questions or concerns when it comes your way. Just give me a call or email and we can work together to straighten it out.