



# **GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE**

of Native Studies and Applied Research

**Interview of Elder Donna Lee Dumont**

**Conducted by David Morin**

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

Donna Lee Dumont, and I am from everywhere. I was born in northern Manitoba at Beresford Lake in a log cabin no less, and on a homemade bed. Isn't that interesting? I have a picture of myself standing at the door of this log cabin, but then I have another picture of me with a little babushka covering my head and with a husky sitting beside a log dog house. So needless to say, I moved around a lot. At one time, I spent half my life in the North. Now that I am older, I am trying to become "cityized."

**2. Where did you grow up?**

Northern Ontario, till I was about 15, and then in Lake Athabasca; the northern shore close to Uranium City. I spent 12 years there.

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

In terms of percent, I lived mostly in the North. I taught in La Loche for five years. I took a year off to work on my Masters, but I went back for another two years, and the year I took off, I went visiting. I've lived in Saskatoon longer than anywhere else. I realized that it's a funny feeling when you spend your life moving and then stop. You realize "Wow, I can't believe it. I can remember when I was here, 12 years in one spot!"

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

I do not know my mother's side. She came from England when she was eleven, and so I really don't know. In later years, when I went to England I met some. I was very close to my father's family, his Red River Settlers. All of my relatives and my grandparents weren't in the Red River Settlement, but other family members were. They were in Bird's Hill. Bird's Hill was name after James Bird. You know the Hudson's Bay explorer? Actually, his daughter married Peter Fidler Jr. Yeah, that's kind of weird, eh? Alfred was my dad and my mom's name was May. My grandmother was the big influence in my life, and her name was Ethel. She was, I think, I mentioned in book about Peter Fidler. She was a so-called "Indian." My grandfather's family had nothing to do with them, and so I never met that part of the family either, which is unfortunate. So, between my father and my grandmother, they taught me about my heritage and made

me feel very proud. I was so curious: I had lots of questions all the time, so my grandmother would say to me, “Go away I am tired of talking.” So yeah, I think my grandmother was probably the greatest influence. I just adored her. We lived in northern Ontario. So when she came to visit, she would have to come by plane. She came in winter sometimes. She came one summer and there were “no-see-ums.” I don’t know if you have them in Nipawin. Well in the north, they are a little smaller than a black fly. They’re like a speck and they’re called “no-see-ums.” Anyway, my grandmother was allergic to them. You know they’d enter her face and everything puffed up, and she had to go home early, and I was absolutely devastated. When she married, my father’s name was Hoddinott. His family has a road named after them in Winnipeg, Hoddinott Road. They had lots of land there, and their family was originally from England. So when she married my grandfather, she became a Hoddinott. Before that she was a Pritchard. Her maiden name was Pritchard, and she was raised on the original Red River land. The Red River settlers were very fortunate. Unlike the Batoche settlers they managed to keep their land. However, my cousin has a letter from my great-grandmother asking for her daughter to have land, but it was not a good thing to be Métis. She looked very Cree you know? Métis wasn’t a word at that place: you were an Indian, but in the end did it bother her. No, she was always really proud.

**5. How did you spend your life as an adult regarding work, family, or in any other ways you’d like to share?**

Oh my gosh, I have done so many things. I was a private secretary. I had a store. It was a ceramic store. I just called it “Donna Lee’s,” but I did a lot of custom work. I taught classes in brush work and how to do creative ceramics. I sold paintings there, too, but it was so time consuming that after my lease was up that was it. Then I went to university fulltime at an older age and prior to that I was just taking auditing classes. So, then I became a teacher, which I absolutely loved. I taught till I was sixty-five. The nice thing is that the kids and even those downtown did not want me to go. They said, “Age didn’t matter.” Yeah, that was very nice. I have four children and two daughters are teachers, and one is a businessman, and my son who died was a chief geologist.

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

Now I enjoy the fact that I belong somewhere. I think that it is different for me because I never have before, but I was always really proud of my heritage. As a kid it never made me feel ashamed—even when it wasn’t good to feel that way. I always walked to a different beat. It’s all good. I feel humble to be part of something that has always been inside of me. I think GDI has done such incredible things. I know that’s not part of the interview, but it’s true, you know? What happens and the way people come together, it’s pretty wonderful. GDI is the beginning of a wonderful cycle. I asked my daughter when she was little in school, “How do you feel about being Métis?” “Ah,” she said, “it is so boring, I have to stand up all the time,” because Gabriel Dumont was her great-great-great uncle. And so, they’d make mention of that often in classrooms and assembly, and they’d stand up. She is a teacher. You know Leah? She sure promotes at every opportunity a Métis theme or books.

**7. What has been the most challenging thing about being Métis?**

I don't find anything challenging about it. I find it challenging to be a person who hears negative things about Aboriginal people. I find that challenging. I was going to use the word hate, but I dislike it when people make little comments, and I find myself being an educator. I don't hear these people saying bad things about so-called white people who are doing the same thing. However, the things they say about Aboriginal people bother me a lot. It bothers me that this history is negative, particularly the way that the land has been taken from the original people by "new" people. They badmouth the people that have been stolen from. History bothers me a lot. As far as being Métis, there's nothing challenging. It's just being a human being and hearing those derogatory remarks and prejudice, you can be any culture and feel that hate.

**8. What is the most important thing that you want others to know about the Métis?**

That it is a distinct culture and something to have pride in. Part of our history for me that is really important is for people to understand that we are part of Canada. However, there are some people that don't even know the difference between Cree, and Dene, or Dakota. What's happening is a bit more awareness in schools and in our newcomer population. I don't think you can change the old ones.

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

I would tell myself to be proud of who I was. I was already proud of having so-called Indian blood as my father would point out because Indian wasn't a bad word, but I wish that people in society would have shown respect for Métis. So I would say be proud of who you are and do your best at everything and never compare yourself to others. That is a big one and children do it, and I certainly did it. I wasn't as pretty. I wasn't as smart. I know in my classroom, when I was teaching everyday, I would put a new quote on the board. It was interesting, even some of the guys would write them down, but on the one side I had a quote, and I never took it off. It was, "a result of our unhappiness is comparing ourselves to others." For teenagers, it's vital, and I wish that I had felt that way when I was young because I knew I was kind of a different kid. Well, that quote lived on that board for twelve years. I used to have a medicine wheel, and I had a big room. So, I had the medicine wheel, and I had that quote, and it initiated a lot of conversation, especially with new students. It gave me an opportunity to talk about it, and it point out that it's good to be different. It's good to be respectful and proud and the whole thing.