



GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE

of Native Studies and Applied Research

Interview of Elder Harriet Oaks-St. Pierre

Conducted by Darren Préfontaine

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

My name is Harriet Oaks-St. Pierre, and my home community is now Yorkton Saskatchewan.

2. Where was your original home community and where were you born?

My community was Marieval-Crooked Lake. Saskatchewan. I was born in Marieval-Crooked Lake. I grew up there in Marieval-Crooked Lake

3. Where have you lived most your life?

I lived in Burnaby, BC for 17 years, and then I lived in BC for 20 years out of my life, and the res of the time, I was in Saskatchewan in Marieval-Crooked Lake and in Saskatoon. I lived on the road allowance. I grew up on and was born on the road allowance in Crooked Lake.

4. Who were your parents and grandparents and where were they from?

My parents were Bob Pelletier and Elizabeth Laframboise. My grandparents were Theresa Pelletier and Fred Pelletier. They were my dad's parents. My dad was born in Marieval-Crooked Lake, and my mother, who was German, was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Laframboise, and she was born in Frankfurt, Germany.

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

Oh gosh, I don't know. I did a lot of different jobs. My very first job was when I was 15 years old, I worked for a farmer, manuring the barns and butchering pigs and watering the bulls on horseback to the creek. Then I went waitressing in Melville at the train station and then I started my family in Marieval-Crooked Lake. Then my first husband and I got married in Keeseekoosie Reserve in Kamsack. We had six children—four boys and two girls. Then I lived a couple years in Melville and a couple years in Regina, and then I moved to BC where I spent 20 years. That's where I raised all the children. As they hit high school, they all left me. So, when I was left alone, I came

back to Saskatchewan. I did all types of work in BC: I did professional house cleaning for big-shot people like doctors, lawyers, actors, actresses. I went home to home throughout greater Vancouver. Then I went to Vancouver community college and I worked at the hospital for five years and I worked for health care services, which was treating senior citizens in their home from home-to-home and gave them their medications and bathed them and babysat them while their spouses went out for a while to give them a break. I also waitressed in Regina and in Burnaby, BC.

6. When you were in BC were there a lot of Michif people from the Prairies living there?

Not at all. I had no communication in Michif with anyone in all the 20 years I lived in BC. I was so afraid that I was going to lose my mother tongue. Most of my siblings lived in Regina and each time they phoned, or if I phoned them, I asked them to speak to me in Michif because I was slowly forgetting my mother tongue.

7. So that was one of the main reasons that brought you back home?

That is because all my people were from back home. I wanted to be close to my siblings.

8. What do you enjoy about being Métis?

Métis people are very respectable. They respect Mother Earth and our Creator, and they are very close binding with their children and spouses. They are helpful people who help those in need. Being a Michif is something to be proud of. It's the way God made us and we ought to be proud of what we are.

9. What's been the most challenging thing about being Métis?

The most challenging thing was long ago, but it's not so bad anymore. When they used to call us "half-breeds," and how it was so hard for us to find a job. If we were lined up and if I was qualified and experienced to do the job, and if there was a white lady next to me, well that one would be hired even though she wasn't qualified. However, now it's beginning to change. Now us Métis people, we have businesses going, and we are just about equal with everybody now. We are well respected now. That was a challenging thing back then, but it's not anymore.

10. Was racism on all sides? Like let's say First Nations and white people against Métis people?

First Nations were not too bad. It was white people that were pretty racist when they called us "half-breeds."

11. Because on your home community a lot of your people were on the reserve and vice versa so it was really just families, right?

That's right. Yes, because the place I grew up in the only thing that separated the First Nation reservation was the river. There were about four reservations across the river from where we lived and we all got along. It was like a big family.

**12. What's the most important thing you want others to know about the Métis?
What stands out most about the Métis that the world should know?**

The Métis, especially the Elders, are wise. They lived a very hard life and they've managed. Like our homes were poor: we had no running water, we had no electricity, and we had no money, but we had neighbours who helped out each other. If you were out of sugar, you would go and borrow the sugar. I feel that by talking to all nations and telling them about our stories from long ago, they should grasp them. You just have to be good to one another, period.

13. That's the golden rule basically.

Very much so, and even with all the wars people have—the fighting and the murdering—that shouldn't be. We should all love each other and live like a great big happy family in the whole world regardless of nationality.

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

I would just say, try your best and be honest. Be good to everyone especially, mark my word, when you have children, give them all the loving you can give them. That is one thing I am sorry about. I had six little children all close together born about 13 months apart, and you know I didn't give them as much loving as I should have. Today, my children are all strong, faithful, good-looking, good workers, and they are all educated. They are all grown up and have families of their own. I watch how they hug their little children and put them on their lap and kiss them—something which I didn't do when I was having children. Today, they are all big and I just wish that I had a life over again. I would still have the same children, but I would pick them up and love them and spend every minute that I could with them. Because if you don't, you won't have another chance, and you will be sorry like I am sorry.