



# **GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE**

of Native Studies and Applied Research

Interview with Elder Jeanne Pelletier

Conducted by David Morin

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

My name is Jeanne Pelletier. I live in Yorkton, Saskatchewan

**2. Where were you born?**

I was born about 70 miles south of Yorkton in a valley in a little town village called Marieval. I grew up in a summer resort, like a beach. It was beach property. I remember growing up there.

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

We moved the beach property when I was three. I left there when I was 14. So most of my life then was with white people for five months [for school] and Aboriginal people for the other months. It was really nice. I stayed with one group in the summer one in the winter. Their teachings were different. Their teachings were all about survival and life skills. Today, I don't see much of that. Well, there is some, but for whoever is interested in it. It was the way I grew up, and all these skills I try to pass them onto my children, but they found that they are "old school," and did not learn them. After that, I moved to the village Marieval. I went to school till I was in grade 8. We had a little school. It was across the river, and they used to call it "Bannock School." After that, we moved across the river to Crooked Lake School and that is the school that I left. Then I went to school in Yorkton and went to school in Regina and then I quit school. I moved around all over the place. I roamed around for the following two years. I lived in the States. I lived with relatives who moved from place-to-place. I was working with musicians. I had lots of relatives who are musicians, and they moved from place-to-place I joined everyone of them and learned how to do lots of things. I then came back and got married. My husband was named George Pelletier.

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

Regina. We lived in the west coast for awhile, and then we moved back to Regina. That's where I raised most of my kids. I had eight children. My husband died when the youngest one was five. I had to stay home, but it wasn't that bad because, at that time, I was on social assistance, and you didn't get very much for a living, but I took

every course they had issued. I took every course to upgrade myself to try to finish my education, so I could stay home and try to look after my children. It worked out well. It was hard and lonely, but today when I look back it, paid off because all my children are pretty well educated and make a good living. That's what I wanted. I upgraded myself so I didn't need anymore. I was one semester short of getting my degree in education. I didn't want to be bossed around. When I saw the rules that teachers had to live by, I could not see myself under that kind of ruling. Never! I am a free person and that's how I lived. I want to be free. After my kids were grown up, I worked at a school. I worked in different communities. I was very busy: I looked after my mother too for about 20 years. I had a Métis dance group before I started working for the school. I did the school curriculum, and I kept very busy with all kinds of people. The more people I met the better. They were from many different ethnic backgrounds. I enjoyed that the most, and that's what kept me going. Finally, things got bad and I lost my vision, and I got some of it back, but not at hundred percent. Then I used to tell my mother stories, either make them up or tell her stories about people who used to do things long ago that she didn't think that I would remember. Every so often, she would tell me, "Where did you hear that from?" I would tell her, "Well, this one is from that guy? You remember? You know?" I would make up little stories just for conversation because I had nothing else to talk about. One day, she told me, "Why don't you write all those stories you were telling me?" "Oh, when I get old," I told her. After awhile, I thought about it, and I took some of my books that I had from the curriculum that I did. I had the rabbit dance story there, I didn't put it in at that time. I kept it. I started working on that and somehow it got up here [Gabriel Dumont Institute]. I have heard that rabbit dance story since I was about four years old. I remember hearing it till I was about 14. There are lots of other stories, too, and they're now just coming back because they were all told in the Michif language. Now, they are coming back, and I can remember more and more of the Michif words, and what story belongs to where because my grandmother told us a lot of stories. I guess it was part of a teaching that we didn't respond to all of the time. But as we got older, it helps us to recall the stories. One of my cousins always liked telling big lies, and she gave him one of the characters names, and (speaks Michif) that means "Chi-Jean was the little liar." That's what she called him, and I figured, "Oh, that's it. You know how things started." I started remembering stuff like that, and I started putting them all together. I am working on about three of them. It's very slow sometimes. Sometimes, I don't feel up to it, and they just come and go. If I have lots of rest then I get a good run, but if I don't rest, and just keep myself up all hours watching TV, then it's no good.

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

My mother's name was Seraphine Lavallee, and my dad's name was Roger Desjarlais. My grandpa was Jimmy Desjarlais and my grandma was Thérèse Pelletier, and on the other side was Napoleon Lavallee and Louise-Anne Sparvier. My parents were from Crooked Lake. Most of us were all born in a road allowance. My grandpa came from Frog Lake, Manitoba. We still have relatives up that way, too.

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

I enjoy everything. I enjoy being who I am. I can go into any cultural group and be proud just like they are. That's just being Métis. I am a little part of you and a little part of everything. It works: I get along fine with everyone. Some may not like it, but it's not my fault. It's their choice.

**7. Do you find anything challenging about being Métis?**

The most challenging about being Métis is dealing with racist people. At an early age I learned how to handle that. I just looked them square in the eye and walked the other way. If you want to be like that, that's your choice, but it's not mine. That's the way that I handled it all my life, and I learned it at an early age. I can remember putting up with people who come from the States and all over, and they were handling the merchandise that we were selling to them. Some of them were very rude. I had to learn at an early age to tell them, "Buy these minnows or get lost or leave!" When I look back, I must seem like a cheeky little girl, maybe not cheeky, but open and honest and straight forward. I never held anything back if I wanted to say something to somebody. I would go and tell them, "If you don't like it that was my choice."

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

When you're planning a goal for yourself, plan to achieve that goal. You have to achieve all those little goals before you get to the big one. Then you keep going up the ladder until you reach your goal. That's what I've been doing; just climbing that ladder. I am still going up one more ladder. I want one more wish and I am working hard at it. I have been working hard in bridging Métis students with others. Everywhere I go, I always have something that brings cultures together. We have an awful good time. I did up a square dance, a Métis dance, and it was based on a hockey game. You know all the different things you learn in a game of hockey such as the different moves and actions that you learn in hockey. It's all used in that dance, and I used Stompin' Tom Conner's "The Good Old Hockey Game" for the music. It's a lot of fun. If you have 120 students, trying to make them dance, that's fun. They found it neat because I put it into a dance. If you have to dance, you move your partner. It's kind of cute. If you have to dance, you move your partner. That was challenging. I like creating things. I take those out and challenge the younger people, and tell them, "If I can do it why can't you? You know, you have all the facilities to use such as computers. I don't I am still old school." The thing is, if it wasn't for my vision, I

would probably be using a computer. I did this when I was working in high school, but after that I just couldn't do it anymore. I only last one hour watching TV, and I have to shut my eyes. I always challenge them like that. I was going to bring some art work that they had done for me for the last stories and they have very good art work. I will bring them next time when I come and visit. No rush for them, but their work was just very nice, and I found out a lot of them didn't know anything about Métis people. I try to bring for the kids in school as much as I can. I found out when I first started working for the school system that there was nothing for Métis: it was all First Nations, French, German, Ukrainian, Scottish, and English. There was no Métis presence so that's when I decided that I would put something in there. I did it with all the little components you had to match up in order to get it before presenting it. I had one lady helping me; she was a German lady. She was a coordinator, but she liked to teach me things. I just told her what I wanted, and she told me how to work it into a resource that worked really well. By the time I took it to the school boards, it was all done up, all they had to do was print it. Did you know I took it to GDI in the first place and they refused it? They said it wasn't Métis enough then I told them how much more Métis must I be? I took it to Catholic School Board, and they said it was well done, but they didn't have enough funding, so I took it to the other school board. They published it. That was not the last shot because, after that, I was going to go public with it. What was wrong with it? Was it rejected because of racism? I know from different people that it was to well done, but I didn't have to go that far. I started searching. I saw that man face who told us we weren't Métis enough. He didn't look Métis to me, and I can't think of his name, but I'll get it yet. It's probably in my old papers some place. He used to fly back and forth Saskatoon to Regina to come to work in Regina every morning. Imagine how many bucks that cost because I asked him where did he get all the money to go back and forth flying? He could have stayed in Regina for five days and gone home. I don't know if he was having a bad day while he told me I wasn't Métis enough. There was no interest there. I was smart enough to know when there was no interest. Those are some of the issues that I had to deal with along the way, but like I just kept going. There was always a back up plan. I always had 1, 2, 3 back up plans in everything I did. Even till this day, because it doesn't always work. We just have to have something on hand to use. I don't know if that was the way I was raised or what. That was always with me because there're lots of crazy dumb things we did while growing up. You know there are other stories. They're about three guys and I am just trying to recall their names. I know one is Bright Eyes or Sharp Eyes. Bright Eyes, Sharp Nose, and Long Fellow, but they all have Michif names. I am trying to think of how to say it. I can remember: they're all giants! The one with the bright eyes can see for miles and miles, the tall one can walk miles and miles and step right across the ocean no problem. The one with the long nose can smell where there is danger or a storm or anything that is disagreeable to his people. They all get whipped away; they all die. It was kind of neat, but I guess the Old People were teaching is that we won't live forever. I'll have to try to remember their names. Some of those words are in Cree. My grandmother was Cree, and I know those names are Cree words. I can't even say my grandfather's name because it's a long sentence. It's all in Cree, and that's his name, and so was his wife, she had the same kind of the name. That's my great-great-great-grandpa. He's the old man who made that mirage at

Batoche to scare the Sioux Indians away. Yeah, that's a true story. It's not fiction because my grandmother told me she was seven years old when that happened. She said they stayed in caves in Batoche for about seven days while they were battling and fighting. We had to make sure those Sioux Indians went back, but after he created the mirage, I guess they thought it was a big camp and went back to the States or wherever they come from or to Medicine Hat. I had written that down in a book when I was 14 years old, and I had it for years. However, while moving, I lost it. Three other girls and I interviewed my grandma, and that's what she told us. To this day, I am the only survivor. The other girls passed away. My grandma was a medicine woman. She used to make us pick herbs for her. Funny thing, when we were picking sage, it grew like you wouldn't believe. Where we lived by the lake, it grew, and we didn't know this was sage. We always used to go pick it up by the hand-full and put it in the bucket, lit it up and scared the mosquitoes away and then played outside. So finally, she saw us doing this and she told us, "I brought some bags here. I want you to fill them up for me with that stuff that you're playing with. You shouldn't be playing with that." We were not playing with it. We were chasing the mosquitoes away with a big smudge. That's when I found out what smudge was. There were lots of herb and different plants, even morning glories that we used. Those morning glories, growing by our window, they're crawling plants. She had flowers that were white and she made some kind of medicine with them. I can remember the medicines, but what their purpose was I can't remember unless I hear someone talking about them, and it clicks in.

**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 plan a goal—a small one—and then work until I got what I really wanted. Just go all the way and follow your heart all the way. That's what I tell all the young people I work with. If you like something and you want it really bad, and you can't get it, there is no such thing as "can't." If you make small goals soon you will reach what you can't get, and when you get that, you can then reach more goals that you can't get. My uncle once told me that there is no such word as "can't" because we told him we couldn't get the horses. Ever since that time, there is no such word as can't in my vocabulary. Young people expect everything handed to them today, but if they plan a little, and just think about what they really want and work their way towards it, they won't get it right away because there are steps that they'll have to take. Just think: can a baby walk right away? No, you know it's the same thing. Just plan till you get older and older, and sometimes things have to change, but you still have something which is good and always use it. Plan something else till you reach what you want to reach.