



GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE

of Native Studies and Applied Research

Interview of Elder Joanna Potyondi

Conducted by Darren Préfontaine

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

Hi I am Joanna Blondeau from Estevan. I was born at Estevan on September 14, 1939, so I am a fossil now.

2. Where did you grow up?

Estevan and Roche Percée on a road allowance. I grew up in a little mining community called Old Talyorton. I went to school there, and one day I brought home my citizenship papers to fill out and my grandfather looked at them and wrote down my name and and put down Métis. The next day I went to school and the teacher took a look and said, "There is no such thing as a Métis," and crossed it out. My name was Blondeau, so she put French. I was just seven years old. My grandpa said, "How dare she do that!" That's my grandpa; he knew what he was talking about. From then on, I asked him questions about how come we were Métis. He told me all in a way that a kid would understand besides trying to be a horse kicking around the house. I was very aware of being a Métis all my life. That was right into our family. They didn't talk our Michif language to me. My mom and my aunt got whipped with wet willows from the river when they talked our language. That was at Roche Percée School, and it was done by the teachers and the principal. There was only usually one teacher who did this. Roche Percée had a little bit of everything because people came from Scotland and Wales, and there were Ukrainians, and a big German population there, but at that school where I grew up there was a few Germans, a few Ukrainians, some Welsh, and Polish. The Michif people were the Blondeaus, the Kleins, Gosselins, Gardipys, Lajimodières. That's all in my home. You ought to find out my history. I got all these people in my genealogy. Now there's [inaudible names]. They married into all the Métis families. There has to be 1,200 Métis down there. My grandpa moved down from Lebret. He was born at Fort Ellice in 1873. It's St. Lazare now. I worked there for four years and didn't even know where Fort Ellice was or that my grandpa was born there. It's mostly French down there, and I was too busy with the Fouillard Ranch as a ranch hand.

3. Where have you lived most of your life?

In Saskatchewan, but I lived in Manitoba for about four years. I grew up at Roche Percée-Estevan, all in that area, in the Souris Valley. The Souris Valley is my home, and I have been in Melville since 1970.

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

My mother was Josephine Blondeau, and my dad was James Blondeau. My grandpa was Alfred Blondeau, and my grandmother was Agnes Blondeau. She was Agnes Gardipy, daughter of Charlie Gardipy, son of Pierre Gardipy at Batoche.

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

I grew up with all my extended aunts and uncles, and all my family around me down around Estevan. Then I got married and had three children: I have two boys and one girl. The one son, Andrew is very interested. He will be doing this stuff when I am gone. He is very interested, and my one son, he is a consultant for the oil field. My husband was a welder, and he had a photographic memory. He graduated school by the time he was 14. He was a welder. He could weld any kind of metal there is. He passed away about 20 years ago from cancer. He was a Michif person. His dad was the last North West Mounted Police officer in Saskatchewan. I am telling I got the history. If you want, I will give you a book. We will take you down there and show you where everybody lived.

6. What do you enjoy about being Métis?

I enjoy our people and teaching our young people things. I give talks and do storytelling, and I used to be with victim's services. I worked with kids and cops, and I used to take them for a week on holidays. It was quite interesting. I am still involved with the RCMP.

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

My most challenging thing was wishing that I finished my schooling. No, nobody [was denied school]. I hardly had that when I grew up because we were a well-established family, and everybody was immigrants. They helped each other mostly, and when there was a problem people got together and helped each other. When my grandfather got pneumonia, some people brought some pork or a deer or helped the family. That's how

I grew up. People helped one another [regardless of their background], and whenever there was a gathering, everybody came, whether it was a birthday or anniversary.

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

They were entrepreneurs from the beginning. They rallied around to whoever needed help, and they helped one another, otherwise we wouldn't be here. They had a strong sense of community.

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 think getting an education would be a top priority. Métis people at the time had to work. There was no option, and that was after the war. Every dime counted. Now today,

I am enjoying my great-grandchildren and my children, and horses are a big part of my world. I still have racehorses. [So, the Métis in your community were horse people?]

No, not too many. We didn't have too many horses, but the neighbors always had a horse that I could steal, and they were always missing a horse for the summer. I always had a horse around, and today, I still have 27 horses. I have an upholstery shop, and I do my sewing. I still sew. When I was a young girl, I didn't even know how to sew a button on. One day, GDI had an upholstery class, and I took it. That's where I am. I am one of your graduates. I didn't even finish the class, and they sent me out to teach with Parklands Regional College. They sent me to work, and I have been working for 17 years since doing this class.