

Road Allowance Interview, Julie Pitzel

Conducted by: Scott Duffee

March 10, 2014

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

JP: Julie Pitzel from Buffalo Narrows, Saskatchewan.

SD: Was that a road allowance community or a Métis community?

JP: Well, there were a lot of Métis people there and some people had mink ranches, most of them were Norwegians, but the majority were Métis people. There were some French people.

SD: Who were your family and grandparents?

JP: My mom's name is Adelaide. She used to be a McKay, McKay-Cummings. My dad's name was Charles Cummings and my grandparents on my dad's side were Ross and Madeline Cummings, and on my mom's side they were Celestine and Lucia (Aubichon) McKay.

SD: Did they always live in Buffalo Narrows, your parents and grandparents?

JP: Well, they lived there when we started going to school. Most of the time, we were out on the trap line, and our trap line was on the upper and lower Cummings Lake by Primrose Lake, and when the house was built on the property, where it was in Buffalo Narrows, it was done when they had *The Homesteads Act*. I asked my dad about it, and I asked my dad about it, and *The Homesteads Act* was, I'm not quite sure about the date in the 1950s, and it gave opportunity for people to get lots. We lived on a river channel lot. There were some people that were there as well. They built a house and cleared it. Then the lots were given, and that became the property of the people there. My grandfather had two lots, and so that's how we got to have lots in Buffalo Narrows, but most of the time we lived on the trap line, and we also went around to different places such as Dillon Lake, where we would camp in different places for whatever reason. Sometimes when the fishing was good, we'd go certain places. When it was time to pick berries, we would go and camp somewhere else and would pick berries. When we started having that house in Buffalo Narrows, that was like our home base because we went trapping and hunting and fishing where we made fish and we gathered food for the winter. That's how we lived when I was younger, and most of the people who were around us lived that same way, too. Their home on the channel used to be their main house. My other grandfather McKay also had a trap line area, and he used to call it Lac Lamarre. I never knew what that meant, but that's where his trap line was. Now they have cabins there, and his home ground was in Buffalo where he must've done the same thing, but in my memory that house was always there. Then we had a little house behind my grandparents' house.

SD: What Métis families lived in that community?

JP: Well, there were the McCullums, McKays, Petits, Chartiers, Desjarlais, Morins, Serights, and Pedersens. I can't think of all of them, but most of the people in those days had large families. So, they were big family groups.

SD: Did any non-Métis live in that community?

JP: Yeah, some of them were non-Métis. There were usually pilots from somewhere else. There were the Nordstroms, the Halvorsons, and I forgot there were some other people there as well. They were the Midgets, but they must've come earlier and Levasseurs and La Chasseurs. I can't think of anyone else.

SD: Did you live in any other Métis communities or road allowance communities?

JP: No, I didn't. I can't remember. That's the way that we lived 'cause we're a trapping and hunting family.

SD: So, your home base was in Buffalo Narrows. The communities you went to, did they have a name where you'd go for seasonal trapping and fishing and berry picking?

JP: Yeah, we used to go to Whitefish Lake because that's where we'd go by river to go to the trap line. Then I don't know if they call it Sandy Bay, but it was on both Little Peter Pond and Big Peter Pond area. We sometimes went to Dillon because we had relatives there as well, and around the beach area, we used to pick Saskatoons and we picked blueberries or a few raspberries. We'd camp for a week or two at Old Ladies' Point, and most of the summers, we camped all over, and did all this kind of stuff, and made dry fish and meat, and lived off of the land.

SD: What other families travelled the same route as you guys?

JP: It was our extended family—my mom and dad my auntie Mary Jane and uncle Magloire, my uncle John and auntie Monique—we would travel together when we did things like that. We had an extended family group, which made the work a lot better, even making hides. We used to make hides so they could make clothing in the wintertime.

SD: Did any of the people in Buffalo Narrows own their own property?

JP: As far as I know they did, and I don't know if it was after *The Homesteads Act* 'cause I don't know where they would pay for it, maybe in Prince Albert or something I'm not sure about that part.

SD: But before *The Homesteads Act* no one owned their own property?

JP: To my knowledge they didn't 'cause our home in Buffalo Narrows came about that time.

SD: How old were you when *The Homesteads Act* came in and your dad...?

JP: Oh cripes, I was probably a baby because as far as I can remember, the house was there while I was growing up.

SD: Before that what did your say they used to do? They just lived there anyways?

JP: They moved around.

SD: They didn't stay in Buffalo Narrows as long?

JP: Yeah, 'cause we didn't have that much. We'd just go there to buy stuff. I think Ile a la Crosse might have been a post and La Loche was a post. I imagine we bought our grub and stuff like that from that place, and in later years, there used to be a barge that came all the way from Big River.

SD: So, Buffalo Narrows was a...

JP: There was no road. There was a plane that came once a week.

SD: And you'd spend your winters in Buffalo?

JP: Yeah, or sometimes part of it on the trap line, and then in the spring, we'd come back.

SD: For a little while and then go back out in the summer for fishing?

JP: And then we'd go around fishing.

SD: And before that place in Buffalo, did your dad ever say where they spent their winters and springtime?

JP: I wouldn't know exactly, but I know that my auntie Ester was born in Black Lake because my grandfather was in the Northwest Territories trapping. So he came down by the river system and ended up in Buffalo Narrows. He told me he lived with the Inuit people.

SD: Oh?

JP: Yeah, he did say they were very hospitable people. My auntie Ester and my uncle John were the oldest ones. I'm trying to remember which one was first. My dad was the youngest. He was born around Buffalo Narrows. But the other ones were born in different places, and in those days, you just had a midwife. You didn't have hospitals. I noticed when my dad was born, it didn't say where he was born. He was not baptized until a month later. So that tells me he was born somewhere else, where there was no missionary.

SD: How did your family and other Métis families make a living in Buffalo Narrows or wherever?

JP: Well, my grandfather was a good hunter, and so was my dad. They were good trappers. They sold furs and their fishing. There used to be a place to sell their fish. We used it for food, and also for buying what we needed. My grandfather said that most of the time when they bought their food, they would charge it up. They never ever dealt with money. That was before Treaty 10 was signed.

SD: So, this is the Half-Breed Claims Commission, Treaty?

JP: Yeah.

SD: That was done during Treaty 10. What year would that have been?

JP: I did know when it was. I forgot.

SD: Oh, 1906.

JP: Yeah. Okay, so we know that. What is truly amazing is his name shows up in North Battleford as him receiving Métis Scrip.

SD: Oh?

JP: So, somebody used his name, and he was sixteen, and he was Treaty 10.

SD: Wow.

JP: And that's illegal. What they will do to get land. Then they'd just go next door. And that's the first time they ever saw money. They didn't know what money was before that. I wonder what the money looked like in those days, eh? Anyway, they go next door, and then he gave his scrip for safe keeping to a priest. He never got it back.

SD: And that was your great...?

JP: My grandfather.

SD: That was your grandfather. That was your dad's dad?

JP: Mhmm.

SD: Wow. So, your dad's dad got a Half-Breed Commission claim during Treaty 10, but someone also used his name to get scrip in North Battleford?

JP: Yeah, during the next year.

SD: The next year.

JP: And he was sixteen at that time. I didn't know you could own property at sixteen.

SD: Yeah, that's an example of what happened during the Scrip system.

JP: Yeah.

SD: What sort of resources did your family harvest?

JP: Fish. The resources that we had were from hunting. We were able to make clothing and sometimes the women would sell stuff. They got a lot of leather. Then they could sell things. Most things were so cheap. In those days, I could go to a movie and have a chocolate bar and drink for .25 cents.

SD: Really? Where was this?

JP: Buffalo. So, the resources were fishing and hunting. And the fish were sold, and my grandfather would go to Big River or Prince Albert, if he didn't get a good price for his stuff. We would charge up at the store, and then we'd have to pay for it when the fur was sold, or they would give the fur to the storekeeper. It was just one cycle of getting credit and giving the fur to the storekeeper. You could sell the fish, but we put away some for the winter for food. We dried fish so we could keep it for a longer period of time. I can't think of any other resources. In later years, my grandfather worked in the fish plant as a night watchman. My dad hunted and fished, but he also prospected around Uranium City. That was around the time that there were gold fields. That was part of his job, to go and help people. They had a radar site set up between Canada and the United States for the early warning system that the government had done. Some people had jobs from there. My dad could build canoes and skiffs, and he could build houses. We planted potatoes, but we didn't do vegetables. My grandfather McKay used to do vegetables, but people used to raid his garden. So, we never planted anything but potatoes because there were too many

garden raiders. Just to subsidize us and our family, he had two lots, and that one lot was for potatoes.

SD: Did you pick berries?

JP: Yeah, we picked berries, and my grandmother used to can cranberries and blueberries.

SD: What sort of traditional medicines were used in your community and family?

JP: My grandmother gave us rat root. We used to have what other stuff? If we had the flu or something, she used to make us drink honey, and I can't remember if it was sage. Not sage, but some other stuff. They had medicine knowledge, but we were never told what they were. We were just taught that when they made it, we didn't touch it or things like that. Only the people that knew medicines would make them. There were some that knew certain kinds. It might be, for example, they used to have birch. The thin lining of birch on one side can be put on a wound, and it will drain it.

SD: Oh?

JP: Yeah, it's a flimsy side of the birch. And that's another thing too; part of the food we used was birch syrup. My grandma and my aunts used to make birch syrup. My grandma used to make lye soap, too.

SD: What was that called?

JP: Lye soap. Yeah, lye soap was used for washing floors and stuff like that, and clothes, if we didn't have any regular soap.

SD: How'd she make that?

JP: You boil ashes in your drain. You then get the lye, and then the fat. The best fat that we used to use, where the soap was just white, was from mink fat.

SD: Really?

JP: We used to make the soap in the fall so we'd have it all winter.

SD: Who were the medicine people in your family and community?

JP: On the Aubichon side, my grandma. My grandma's dad was a medicine man, and my grandma McKay knew some medicine. So, they knew, but they never discussed the medicines with us.

SD: Do you have anyone in your family that made beaded moccasins or?

JP: Well, I tried making some, but I kept having trouble with the heel. I probably would never be married, because one of our traditions is based on this saying: "If you love me make me a pair of moccasins." There is a truth in that. You have to learn how to make moccasins for your future husband. And your aunts look at it, and if you don't do it right, they'll take it apart and you have to re-make it. I would never be married today because my mom died when I was fifteen. So, the training for making things was not done for me. Anything that I learned, I learned in my adult life, like making small objects like dream catchers, maybe medicine bags, just different things like that.

SD: How did your family celebrate special occasions and holidays like Christmas,

Easter, or New Year's?

JP: Well, we are Catholic, so of course, we celebrated Easter, not specifically for the Easter bunny, but everything was around mass. Christmas was mass, and then later, we started having concerts at school, and then we also started giving each other presents. We were people that give presents all year round, so we didn't really need Christmas.

SD: Did or does anyone in your family speak Michif?

JP: We all did. We spoke Dene, Cree, Michif, and my grandparents spoke fluent French as well. I didn't learn French, just the Michif language. I know some things, like le couteau, and la forchette when they went with the Cree words like "sit on the chair." "Apitow la chaisse." We had French, Cree, and Michif. So, we were never stuck for a word because we had all those languages. When I went to first-year school, I flunked because I didn't know how to speak English. So, I had to learn how to speak English.

SD: Do you know any traditional Métis stories or songs?

JP: Yeah.

SD: Would you care to share one?

JP: I shared them with somebody else already.

SD: What are your best memories about living in Buffalo Narrows?

JP: I think people being friendly and neighbourly. We'd help one another when there were problems. If you looked at it as outsiders, you'd think we were poor, but we didn't think we were poor. We enjoyed life, and we were taught a certain way to behave at that time. We had to learn how to treat people with respect, and we got different teachings at home. We were expected to help within the house, like any other child. We had our duties. We were also trained to do leather work and stuff. We were taught different things, and we were responsible for helping with the younger kids. Then we had music. Just about every family had music. There were guitars, violins, accordions, and harmonicas. People used to dance, and I remember learning all the quadrilles, and square dances, and jigging. Not that I can jig anymore. I don't know why. My brother's the jigger in our family. So, we always had music somewhere, and storytelling. We enjoyed that. My grandmother used to tell us a lot of stories. That's what I remember and being able to go on a hunting trip and being part of it. I remember my granny and I, and my grandpa went hunting. There were just three of us, and this moose was humongous. It was so big, and he fell on the beach where there was sand. We had to put leaves down so that when we cut the meat, sand wouldn't go into the meat. So, we had to flip it over, and I remember my grandfather had some on his leg. He had to string it up, and I had to hold onto the string and pull it with the help of that tree, and to flip it over. I remember before he passed away, he told me, "My girl our horns are still there." He had gone there where we had gone hunting, I guess. So, there are a lot of good memories. We used to

have a record player, so we had music in our home. We were in choir in church, all that kind of stuff.

SD: Are there any bad memories that you'd like to share?

JP: Oh, I don't know. We were taught to see the good side of things. So, we didn't dwell too much. I guess one of the things that really affected me was when my mom died when I was fifteen. That was a rough, rough time.

SD: Yeah. How were the Métis treated in your community?

JP: I wrote a paper one time when I was in grade nine and I said if somebody applied for a job, and one was a drunken white man, and the other was an Indian or Métis guy, the drunken white guy would get it.

SD: Did your family encounter racism from the larger community?

JP: In Buffalo, there wasn't as much, but there was a class structure among the ones who were higher up because of their status in the community. Different people who came into our country had some of those attitudes. It might be the nurse. It might be the police. They had attitudes towards us.

SD: Do you have any specific examples of anything you remember?

JP: I can't really remember. I knew we used to be ashamed to wear our moccasins. We had to have shoes to be "in." It's just like the kids today, they have name brand clothes, and they don't feel like they fit in if they don't have them. Now, it's really cool to have mukluks and all that kind of stuff. It's reversed. So, it's kind of interesting. I have faced racism more in the city.

SD: Is there such a thing as squatting up north?

JP: Well, we never ever thought we squatted. I guess if we looked at the law, I guess we did squat because we didn't own the land, if you call that squatting. We have an identity to the land that we're on.

SD: Did your parents ever refer to where they were living as squatting on that land?

JP: No, I think we identified really well with the land. That's our trap lines and the places where we go. It's amazing. I always used to tell people, if they couldn't understand how my grandfather felt about his trap line, "Well if you're a farmer, look at your land where you have planted grain. That's how my grandfather felt about the land he trapped on."

SD: When did people start to leave Buffalo Narrows and why?

JP: Well, some of them went for further education and jobs. We didn't go to many places in those days because the roads just came in the later part of the 1950s or early 1960s. So, we didn't go out very much to another place. When the road came in, we had games against people towards Ile a la Crosse, and we didn't have to go that far because there were hardly any vehicles.

SD: Do you know if any of your ancestors were involved in the 1885 Resistance?

JP: I'm not quite sure about that because we weren't allowed to talk about those people who were in the resistance. We were told not to say that we were related to

them or anything. We were told not to if we were related. In later years, my grandmother told us that we were related to Louis Riel, but to my understanding my grandmother was four years old, and she ended up in the convent in Ile a la Crosse. And sister Sarah, who was Louis Riel's sister, was one of the nuns there. So, I think she might have met Louis Riel when he came to see his sister. So, she probably called him uncle, and so she'd say that he was our uncle. We were taught not to talk about that stuff.

SD: Do you know why?

JP: Because of the resistance. There was such a split between groups of people.

SD: Didn't wanna get in trouble by anybody?

JP: Yeah or be hated because we were related to somebody who was in the resistance.

SD: Who would have hated you for that?

JP: Well people who took sides. You know they were either against Riel and the Métis, if they had taken sides.

SD: Did anyone in your family serve in the military?

JP: No, because my dad was pretty young. Living up north was like being in no man's land. They were pretty isolated. There were a few people from the north that came, but not from my family. There weren't that many that went, but there was a few.

SD: Was anyone in your family involved with the Métis Society?

JP: Oh lots, yeah. My grandfather would hitchhike rides to come to Batoche. Yeah, he was a great follower of Jim Sinclair. We thought it humorous because he told us in Cree. He used to talk to Jim, and Jim didn't talk Cree. So, I'd talk for them. And say, "(speaks Cree) Jim." And he used to say, "Jim Sing," because he couldn't pronounce Sinclair, right? He was a good adviser, too. He talked to him, one time when Jim Sinclair didn't want to go and see the Queen, he came to see him and he said Jim, "Why you no see the Queen?" He spoke in broken English. Jim looked at him, "Well, she gets so much money she doesn't help us." "But you know Jim, you no go, but others want to see the Queen. Another one will see the Queen. Send somebody, eh?" But that passed, and then he said, "Jim you no see the Queen. Now you go see the Pope." And Jim said, "Well grandpa how come I go see the Pope? Oh, you go and see the prime minister you pick up the phone, right? You wanna go see the Pope, you pick up the phone." Jim did go and see the Pope. We're very interested in what was going on, and my grandfather's dream was to have his trap line for land, and he was very upset when they tried to set up the pulp mill by Green Lake. He hitchhiked to Prince Albert, and he said, "Come on, we're going to see Jim Sinclair because it's not right. They didn't talk to people. They're gonna kill all my animals on my trap line from that river. They'll kill all my animals." So, he came to see Sinclair, and we had to protest. We used to call that "Thatcher's Pasture." Because all of a sudden there were power lines, land was being cleared, and we didn't know what was

going on. And the land has not been settled for the Green Lake people, and that's in that area.

SD: Wow. Do you have anything else you would like to share about living in the community you grew up in?

JP: I don't know. I would like to say we're all in the same situation when we were together, and there was a lot of respect between people. We didn't have our own personal agendas. We tried to help one another and make proper decisions for the organization. I feel that our organization at that time was more grounded. There were a lot of meetings in communities, and a lot of getting together. I would say that these last twelve years or maybe longer, the distance between the people has really drifted apart, where we now have an organization in which some of the benefits are not going to the local people. I don't think that organizations like that can survive.

SD: Yeah alright.

JP: That's about all I can think of.

SD: Thank you.