

Henri Bouvier—Parks Canada Interview, February 3, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): Okay, well I guess we can start. It's February 3rd, this is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Henri Bouvier for the Parks Canada Grasslands project. How are you Henri?

Henri Bouvier (HB): Good, fine.

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

HB: Henri Bouvier, and I'm from the area of Willow Bunch.

DP: Willow Bunch. Now you're not Métis?

HB: No, I'm not.

DP: You've lived in the community, you've been away, and you've had I guess a lifetime of reflection on Métis and Francophone history and culture. Could you tell me a little bit about what you remember about the Métis people growing up? Now you grew up in Willow Bunch originally Henri, or?

HB: No. I grew up in the Lisieux area.

DP: Okay.

HB: About 30 miles from the Willow Bunch area.

DP: And there were Métis people in Lisieux?

HB: There were very few, and most of them that were, were originally from the Willow Bunch area.

DP: Do you remember some of the family names Henri?

HB: Gaudry, Gosselins, Belisles; mostly those three names.

DP: And they were more on the Willow Bunch side of Lisieux?

HB: Yes.

DP: Okay. Do you remember much about Métis people growing up?

HB: Well, the first ones I met were the ones we met going to school in Lisieux, and to say, they were no different than anybody else. They were just like us, and we got along with them. And this history, and I never met the gentleman, my dad used to talk of the old Catchoo [Angus Alexandre] McGillis.

DP: Oh, yes.

HB: He would visit and talk with him, and I think he was from the St. Victor area.

DP: Yes.

HB: And every time he'd be passing through there he'd say, "I went to Catchoo, and we talked about this, had discussions," and so on. It was always very positive.

DP: So what was your father's name?

HB: Henri.

DP: Henri Bouvier as well?

HB: Right.

DP: Now your father visited a lot with Mr. McGillis quite a bit?

HB: Quite a bit yeah, well whenever he happened to be in the area.

DP: So he considered him a close friend?

HB: Yes, he did.

DP: And they talked a lot about, just everything basically?

HB: I think that's how we got the positive, I guess feedback or attitude towards the Métis. They were a minority group as we were in our area, and it was positive.

DP: So your dad visited with him quite a bit. I assume they probably just would have spoke French the whole time?

HB: That's right.

DP: Do you remember much else about Mr. McGillis?

HB: No that's as much of my youth as I remember.

DP: Okay. But he was good friends with your father?

HB: Yes.

DP: Did he interact lots with the other French Canadians in the area or, or just mainly with your dad?

HB: That I wouldn't know. Whether or how much interaction there was, no. I wouldn't be able to tell you.

DP: Okay. Do you remember much about how Métis were treated by others in society when you were growing up? Like do you remember seeing instances where people were intolerant towards them or whether or not?

HB: Well I think going to school in Lisieux was where I saw first the attitude that was not positive, and that they were looked down upon. And I think to this day, I still say well you know even if they were less fortunate in society and so on, they did not deserve the attitude that other people were having on them.

DP: So it was families, church, school, everything?

HB: Yes, and I don't think the school did really anything to help in that domain at all so.

DP: Did they try to keep the French Canadian and the Métis kids apart or?

HB: Oh not in that aspect, I don't think, not to my knowledge.

DP: The kids all played together?

HB: To say, "Hey, we are all in this world together;" some are not as fortunate as others. We should help, not look down upon them, you know? I don't think, in my youth, we did. I do not know of Métis families that were looked upon as being the upper class, rich and well off and so on. So that didn't help you know?

DP: You think there was a class division to it?

HB: That's another thing yes.

DP: So some of the Francophones had a bit more money, some had less, and the Métis possibly had had even less?

HB: And to us we're the same thing. You start comparing us, maybe we were more fortunate than they were.

DP: There were a lot of poor Francophones there too. So you remember having a lot of commonalities and you will always remember the positives?

HB: Yes, I do.

DP: Everybody went to church together.

HB: It was the same for all.

DP: Everyone went to school together. Everybody spoke French.

HB: Something I think, we got along fine in school and church.

DP: When did you leave Willow Bunch, Henri?

HB: We left in the '60s.

DP: Now were there still a fair number of Métis in the country that you can remember or were they largely gone by then?

HB: Well, I think after going to school in Lisieux, I had very little contact with the Métis. I went to boarding school, after boarding school, we left the province so.

DP: Okay. You went to Collège Mathieu?

HB: That's right.

DP: Were there any Métis kids at Collège Mathieu or just strictly Francophone children?

HB: Francophone. If they were Métis, I wouldn't have known if they were or not.

DP: Nobody would have said.

HB: No, not to my knowledge.

DP: Okay. So you don't have any recollections of any Métis students there?

HB: Not that we would regard as being Métis.

DP: And you moved to Manitoba after, when you became an adult and made a life there?

HB: Yes.

DP: While you were in Manitoba do you have any recollections of Métis people or?

HB: A lot of them in the east St. Laurent area.

DP: St. Laurent okay.

HB: And with the Francophone association I was involved there too, with the Métis and with the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste also.

DP: Did you notice a difference between how Métis were perceived in Manitoba among Francophones and how they're perceived in Saskatchewan among Francophones? Do you notice a difference?

HB: I think they are more outgoing. I think there's more pride.

DP: In the Métis?

HB: In the Métis there than what I see here. And, just an example I can't quite remember the school system in St. Laurent, they had their own school. Teaching their own language there. And a lot of culture, which is mostly the fiddle, dancing, the jig and so on in the school. And I'm not familiar enough with the school system in Saskatchewan to know how much of that is being promoted or taught.

DP: Do you think because in Manitoba more people speak French, like say more people of French Canadian descent, well Métis descent that kind of helped things a bit?

HB: I think there were more clusters than wide spread type of thing, you know? I think that helped them.

DP: Okay. When you and Lorraine moved back to Saskatchewan you moved to Willow Bunch. You were raised in Lisieux, but you were probably quite familiar with Willow Bunch obviously. What struck you as some of the big changes in the community when you moved back?

HB: I think the, well it wasn't necessarily a change, but the lack of change more than the change. What I mean there is that mostly there was still a lot of rifts between the Francophones and the Métis.

DP: Okay.

HB: And I think the dialogue we tried to get eventually going. It was very difficult to get off the ground.

DP: So you, there was still some of the same old tensions?

HB: Oh, yeah.

DP: Do you think over time, now you've lived in the community now again for more than ten years right?

HB: Nine years this year.

DP: Nine years. Do you think in those nine years things have changed?

HB: Yes, I think they have.

DP: Generally more positive?

HB: Positive, yes.

DP: Now there was a roundtable in Willow Bunch among Métis and Francophones, and that was kind of I guess a sense of community healing. Do you think that went a long ways?

HB: I think that got us going a long ways, and it's still talked about. Still saying we're going in the right direction.

DP: So you see more positives coming now than more negatives.

HB: Also more pride in themselves also, who they are. Not being afraid to say, "Yes we are Métis and we're proud of it." And I think there's more acceptance in the community. Let's get rid of all these, how would you say, the old attitudes and so on.

DP: So you generally think things have improved for the better?

HB: I think so, yes.

DP: Do you think, I don't know how to phrase this, but sometimes some of the biggest divisions come by people who were very closely related. Do you think sometimes that could explain why Métis and Francophones didn't get along? In the sense they were all French speaking, they were all Catholic, they had similar culture yet there was this estrangement.

HB: Yeah, I think a lot of it. How would I phrase it? One always looks for another one that they can pick on, to make themselves feel superior or better. That's what happens you know?

DP: Do you think a lot of it had to do with the fact that Francophones were a minority that were sometimes persecuted as well?

HB: They were looking for a minority that they could persecute. There's a lot of that there.

DP: Growing up as a Francophone you probably certainly remember instances where there was discrimination against Francophones from the Anglophones. So kind of a vicious cycle of lateral violence really?

HB: Yep.

DP: But now you generally see the positives. Out of what's happening in Willow Bunch as a Francophone with an interest in Métis history what sorts of initiatives do you think should occur in the town, and in the region in general to try to get people to better understand Métis history and culture?

HB: Well, I think the museum is helping a lot in that. And I think the other one, I'm just going from a reading we had last Monday in town here to discuss the Francophone survival and so on. And part of that session also was that we had to partner with others and share what we have and take pride in supporting others in what they're trying to promote. So I think there's more cooperation that when the town puts an activity on that they support and promote the Métis, the Francophones, and English. The history in the area and what each group has to offer in the community. I think more of that has to happen.

DP: More of that, but definitely some good steps have been taken?

HB: Yes there has, yes. There's a foundation on which we can work on now and move forward.

DP: As a member of the Assemblée communautaire francsaskoise and as someone who works actively in the Francophone community, do you hope that there will be a larger initiative? I know you've been involved with the roundtables with Métis across the province and with the Métis and Francophone political body you hope that there's more cooperation and ...?

HB: Yes. Well I went to the Francophone assembly last weekend in Saskatoon where there was a signing of the pact between the Francophone community and the Métis Nation. And I think that is a positive step to begin with, to recognize that how many years ago we were working together then we split. It's time we get back together. We have a lot of things in common, and a lot of history that is common to both: loss of language, loss of rights, and so on. And to work together to help each other.

DP: Okay. And you think that's a means to definitely rejuvenate a lot of small communities like Willow Bunch and a lot of other Métis-Francophone communities.

HB: I hope. Yep.

DP: Now living in Willow Bunch, you're close to Grasslands National Park. What sorts of things would you like to see there that better reflect Métis and Francophone, or Métis history and culture?

HB: Oh boy, recognition somewhere, somehow of the contributions that they had in the setting up of the area and so on. There's not enough recognition or knowledge of that, and I think that has to come out stronger.

DP: Okay, that the Métis—

HB: If it weren't for the Métis, Willow Bunch wouldn't have existed.

DP: No.

HB: And the other communities, it's the same and you know, and it's the English or the French that take, I'd say ownership of that. And that's not right.

DP: Okay. So definitely a stronger recognition of what the Métis contributions were.

HB: Definitely, yes. Which is rightfully theirs, I mean it should be, they should claim it and be proud of it.

DP: What do you think of, I was talking with some other people about trying to get some sort of community plaque or recognition for the Métis Hamlet in Willow Bunch, do you think that's a good idea?

HB: To me it would be because it's something that existed. People still talk about it. But there's nothing nowhere to show that it existed and where it was and so on.

DP: So you definitely, think that would be a good idea to have some sort of recognition?

HB: Yes.

DP: Because it's kind of an interesting story from what I understand. Jean-Louis Légaré, he gave that land to the Métis so the Métis could live on it, and the Métis had lived on it for more than a hundred years. In fact, the last person I understand just left not that long ago. So there was always Métis people living on it. So it's an interesting part of the history down there.

HB: I think there's also, I don't know how you call it, the Métis Cooperative years ago, and I mean that's also part of history.

DP: Yes.

HB: And I don't know of any documentation or part of that, that would revive that to make it more knowledgeable for everybody.

DP: So those two things in particular, because that was definitely two key components to Willow Bunch history. Any other things that you can think back to about relating to the Métis that you think are important that not a lot of people know? Like in and around Willow Bunch or Lisieux?

HB: Well I don't know. I'm just looking around here. I think the Métis got their own local, but I think at the museum there's flag poles there and the Métis flag could be on one of those to recognize the contribution that they had around the surrounding area.

DP: Is there just the Canadian or is there the Fransaskois?

HB: Usually just the Canadian, and even when that one's up, the Saskatchewan one. And there are three poles so at one time there was the Canadian one, and the Francophone one. There would be room for the Métis one which would be a nice gesture.

DP: Yeah, okay for sure.

HB: Those types of things you know.

DP: Yeah for sure. Sometimes symbolic gestures, they mean a lot.

HB: They go a long way.

DP: That's right. Is there anything else you would like to add Henri?

HB: Not just now. I think just the fact that it's more open now, people recognize it. To me it's positive.

DP: And you've got hope for the future.

HB: Yes I do.

DP: Alright then well, I guess we'll conclude the interview. I have a couple house keeping things then we can talk for a bit.

HB: Okay sure.

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