

Velma Foster—Parks Canada Interview, March 7, 2012

Disclaimer: *The views presented in this interview are those of the interviewee and are not the views of the Gabriel Dumont Institute. This interview is copyright of the interviewee and can only be used for reference purposes. It can not be republished and/or repackaged in any way without the written permission of the interviewee and/or his/her successor.*

Darren Prefontaine (DP): This is Darren Prefontaine, and I'm interviewing Velma Foster for the Parks Canada project and its March 7th. Hello Velma, How are you?

Velma Foster (VF): I'm fine thank you, and you?

DP: Great ...

DP: Could you please tell me your name and where you're from originally?

VF: Okay, Velma Foster, and I was born in Maidstone. That's what you wanted to know?

DP: Yes. Now your heritage, are you Métis or non-Métis?

VF: No, I'm not Métis, just in spirit.

DP: Okay, just in spirit. Now Maidstone, is it close to a Métis community?

VF: Well, Maidstone is just 20 miles west of Bresaylor.

DP: Okay, now this is where your interest in Bresaylor comes, just being in the region?

VF: Yes. I have relatives in the Paynton and Maidstone areas, and actually, I was visiting them when I found out that the church here in the hamlet was not used any more. So I investigated that, and I purchased the church, and that is what brought me to this community. I purchased it as a summer studio to start with, because I'm an artist, and I was living in Calgary. Then as time went on, I found that was a long commute, and I decided to just move up here, so I just moved into the church.

DP: Okay. Now, you grew up in the area, do you have any recollections of Métis people being in the Paynton and Bresaylor area growing up, and being a young adult?

VF: Well, we moved to Lloydminster when I was about six or seven, and so I was aware of some of the names that I've heard since. One was Wells, and Spences, of course, we had them in our family, and then I was familiar with Bresaylor just from driving through it, but I really didn't know the community all that well, but yes we had Métis people. In Lloydminster, of course, it's a large community, so there were just as many I guess, but we weren't aware of many.

DP: Okay, but you even had Métis in your extended family, though?

VF: Actually, I have a cousin of a cousin, I guess. My aunt married an uncle of mine, had a sister who married a Spence, so we're cousins of cousins kind of thing. Cliff Spence, for instance, is the cousin of a cousin.

DP: Okay, is it fair to say that the Métis in the Bresaylor/Paynton area were largely English Métis or Métis with non-French background?

VF: Well, I think that original Bresaylor community, from my research, would be I think predominately English/Scottish background. But, there's definitely French of course in the Sayers, but you'd probably know more about that than I would. Just going by the names of some of them as noted in history: Pierre Guillaume [Sayer] from the Red River Settlement, and then there was the Moïse, and names like that pop up, so I know there's French in the background as well. Of course, there are others ... well, Caplette, of course, is French.

DP: Yes. So it was predominately English/Scot's Métis, but with some French Métis intermarried in to the community?

VF: Well, I would say that. Are you familiar with the Bresaylor background?

DP: Other than the family names, no not really.

VF: Oh, so I'm providing some information for you I guess.

DP: Yes, yes, and for the project. Unfortunately, as I said in the meeting at Fort Battleford, we really don't know a lot about Scots and English Métis to the same extent as French Métis. It seems Métis Studies is predominately focused on French Métis, and really it's a detriment of other Métis groups, because now everybody's part of the Métis community, but at the time, of course, there were different Métis communities, if I might use that word, and there was often intermarriage, but there was also distinct differences. Now, you became interested in Bresaylor mainly because you moved into the area and acquired that property?

VF: Yes, well there was still Joe and Cecil Sayers. They still lived in the community here, in the hamlet, Joe in the summer. His father was Joseph Sayers, Sr. and his brother Cecil lived here as well year round, so I got to know them.

DP: Are there any Métis families that live around Bresaylor now, or have they all moved out?

VF: Okay, the main descendents are of the Sayers family. Up until, I guess, not too long ago, there were more Taylors here, descendents, but they're pretty well gone. The name Bremner is no longer here either, but then Bremner and Sayers are really the same family here. The original Henry Sayers, that was the senior Sayers that came, was married to Mary Bremner, and she died before they came here in 1882, but all the original family were hers, which was ... I just forgot the number now ..., actually 10 living...are basically the families that stayed in the community. The second family of Henry Sayers and Elise (Beauchamp) seem to have left the area. So actually just about all the Sayers in the area are really part Bremner as well.

DP: Okay. So those two families in particular, there was a lot of intermarriage?

VF: Yeah, well that was the main one I would say. I can't think off-hand of another one, but of course that's the main family that came here, Henry Sayers's family.

DP: So in terms of your research, you found that they were the biggest family, and then the other families intermarried into the Sayers clan?

VF: Just the Bremners. I guess that is part of the story of Bresaylor. That there were those kinds of divisions. Divisions of politics, and to some extent religion, but I guess that's what makes it interesting.

DP: There were definitely class divisions at Bresaylor?

VF: Well, I don't know if I'd call it class, but even during the rebellion, the 1885 Rebellion, the Taylors, McDonalds, Spences ... Those families, when trouble broke out, they immediately went in to the fort at Battleford, and took refuge, whereas the Sayers and Bremners stayed in the community watching their stock, and I guess they thought that maybe they were safe here because they knew Poundmaker, of course. Anyway, that's part of the story and part of the controversy I guess, just what really happened. In the end, they were taken into Poundmaker's camp by Riel's men. So they were considered prisoners, but then later they were considered treasonous too, as you know probably that story.

DP: In terms of your research, what interesting things about the Bresaylor settlement came up? Like, what sorts of things about Bresaylor did you find really interesting?

VF: Well, I think that, well like I said, its kind of a controversy, but it makes for very interesting history, as I learned more about the experience of those people when they went through the rebellion at that time, and the difficulties that it created. But also, how they somehow did rebuild, and also, even originally they had come out here together, the Bremners, Sayers, and Taylors. They became the first three families that came. I guess we know that back in Manitoba, in the first Riel Rebellion, they had different sympathies.

DP: Yes.

VF: In fact, some of the Taylors, I believe, were taken prisoner by Riel.

DP: Yes.

VF: And so they related to the government side, and I guess that was obvious when trouble broke out here. But, in the meantime, they had seemed to have gotten over those differences, and decided to come together, and I always found that so interesting. They were really building a very vital community when trouble broke out, and then of course they lost a lot of that.

DP: What sorts of things were the English Métis at Bresaylor, were they tarnished with the brush of rebels, or was it just certain families, or, did everybody get tarnished?

VF: Well, I gathered that there was a lot of back and forth, you know, sort of commentary, and you'd hear this from later settlers, and I would think that they all were prejudiced against by later communities. Partly because of the rebellion thing, but also just being Métis.

DP: So you think that all the Bresaylor families that were Métis encountered racism?

VF: Well they must have, because from hearing from the descendents, many of the people in the community, if they could avoid it, they just didn't talk about their Métis background or their Native background. Of course, if they had English names, and they could pass as white, they tended to, and many of the younger ones didn't know about their background, and that was part of the stories, finding out who they were.

DP: Yeah, because they certainly would have had to hide their identity to make their way in the new west, I guess, that developed.

VF: Well, it was to an advantage. That's for sure, and that doesn't speak against them, that speaks about the prejudice.

DP: Yes. Any other interesting things came out in the research? What happened to the Métis families after 1885, did they prosper?

VF: Well, they did rebuild, and that is also what I find quite amazing. They were a community here until the turn of the century. It wasn't until 1902, when some of the first settlers, or newcomers, came into the area, and in 1903 of course, the Barr Colonists group came through; that was the biggest group. But, until that time really, Bresaylor was the community. Eventually, I think they just got kind of overwhelmed over time, but many of the families did persist, and they continued for quite a few years after, but I think a lot did migrate to somewhere else.

DP: Okay. Any other interesting aspects relating to Bresaylor come out in you research, or the time you spent in the community?

VF: Well, I guess just some of the personalities are pretty interesting. Likely you're familiar I'm sure with Charles Bremner, and his fur story?

DP: Yes.

VF: Of course, that has brought on the interest of an awful lot of descendents of Charles Bremner. I've met so many of them, or heard from so many of them, they are all interested to find out they have a connection with this community. But also, Joe and Marie-Rose Sayers Sr., and perhaps you're familiar with their history.

DP: To a lesser extent...

VF: Yeah, they were quite an amazing couple, because theirs was a mixed marriage: she was Catholic, and he was Anglican, but they had a marriage that lasted 76 years! They both lived to be very old, but the last year or two of that 76 years, I gather they weren't in very good

shape, but still, it's quite remarkable. They had a pretty interesting family that did very well in the world.

DP: So their descendents did quite well?

VF: Oh yes, they're quite a varied group. There were those that remained here that farmed, Leonard, the youngest, became a lawyer, and then Harry ... We have a little more detail on that in the history book, I've kind of forgotten some of the details, but Harry I think was probably also in law ...

DP: Okay.

VF: ... One was a dentist, and they all really did quite well in their lives. They didn't all stay here of course, but Sayers, that the Joe Sayers family, were quite determined to have their children educated, and they could afford it, I guess. If the children were interested and able they seemed to have been able to get *an* education. A couple of the girls took nursing as well. So a very interesting family.

DP: It is, and it sure shows that we shouldn't have preconceived notions about English and French Métis not marrying one another, and that there was some upward mobility for Métis, I guess, if they could hide their identity, so to speak, and try to fit in the Anglo west anyway.

VF: Yeah. I don't know how much ... they did very well, and were able to compete well; perhaps it didn't matter so much. But, anyway it wasn't always an advantage, that's for sure.

DP: No. In terms of what's left in Bresaylor Velma, is it a hamlet with buildings? What's left just a few homestead sites?

VF: Well, if you consider the whole area, like that's how I think of the Bresaylor Settlement. Of course, is what it was, because it covered a big area. I guess you're not familiar with this area.

DP: No, not really.

VF: Yeah, see along the Yellowhead here, the communities: there's Delmas, you'd be familiar with that name, and then Bresaylor, and then Paynton, and those are all the usual 7 miles or so apart. And so the range of that area that the original settlement covered really extends from Delmas, over to Paynton area, then and north from the Saskatchewan River to the Battle River. That was kind of the whole area where people settled, and that was sort of considered the Bresaylor settlement. So there's still Sayers that farm, ~~far~~ over towards Delmas thereabouts, but there's been a lot of intermarriage with other people, so actually there's descendents kind of spread here and there. Then there's the Sayers that are closely associated with Paynton, and on the other side of Paynton, heading up towards Maidstone, some of Joe Sayers's family descendents live out there. The land that was Taylor land is in other hands now, because there are no Taylors that I ... well, I'm pretty sure there are no Taylors here anymore. Different people own the land, because they dispersed, and one of the

last of them living hereabouts past away recently. Then there are a couple... well, there one family of Caplettes in the Delmas area...

DP: Okay.

VF: Yeah, that's about it. There's not many left in the area anyway, because of the large farms. That means the countryside is emptied out. As far as the hamlet goes, I'm the only one left here right now; two of the buildings belong to the museum, and that's the main thing that's here now, is the museum.

DP: Now the museum itself, when was the museum founded, and what's its mandate?

VF: Well, it's actually Joe Sayers ... they called him "Little Joe," he would be the son of Joe Sr., or course and Marie-Rose. He had a little what he called a museum, but it was very informal. He had a building separate from where he lived, and those are the two buildings we have now. He brought things in from the original Sayers, Joe Sayers's farm, and just brought them in, and started putting together a collection. People gave him things. Some of the Taylors gave him things. So when he came back in the summer, he would just sit over in the park and talk to people, and tell them about his museum, and invite them in. He kind of got a kick out of showing people some of his ancestor's artifacts.

DP: Okay.

VF: So when he, I came into the picture, I guess unintentionally, but, of course, I had talked to Joe a lot about history, and I used to drive him into town. Some of the women in the area that had been involved in the Women's Institute of Bresaylor. They were quite a strong group in their day, and they still retained an interest in the community. They asked me if I would talk to Joe, and see if he wanted them to have them help keep the museum going after ... because you know, he was already in his 90s. So I talked to him about it the fall before his last trip home to Victoria, and he was very interested, and very happy to have help, and see it continue. Then he went home and became seriously ill, and actually died before Christmas, I think it was ...

DP: Okay.

VF: But meanwhile, he decided that he would turn it all over to me. So that's kind of how I came into it. It was kind of, I had to decide, you know, "Is this a good thing to do or not?" But, I was definitely interested in the idea, and so I said, "Well, I would, but we would form a community committee to run the museum." It wouldn't remain mine.

DP: Okay.

VF: Anyway, that's what happened. We got a board together, a founding board, and that is who really runs the museum, other than I'm the curator, and have stayed on as the curator for all these years, so ...

DP: So in terms of the mandate, it's just to preserve the history and culture of the Bresaylor community?

VF: Yes, and of course we've included later settlers as well in our mandate. So there's a lot of variety of things in the museum, but we do have that original collection of Joe's, and then there's been a lot added to it.

DP: Okay. In terms of your long-term plans, and the board's long-term plans, what would you like to do with the Bresaylor Museum? You had indicated you wanted to get some sort of special status for it, is that correct?

VF: Well, that was kind of an opening that I found helpful, because I've been concerned for a few years now about what's going to happen when I go. Because you have to have somebody living here who's going to stay in Bresaylor. There's no community, there's no village around, it's just me. So if somebody isn't living here, security is a problem.

DP: Yes.

VF: So it has to have that. So that's been my concern, but I haven't been able to figure out how to get somebody into that position, I still haven't figured that out exactly. We've been meeting as a board ever since the thought about this possibly being a historic site or event, in terms of Parks Canada, and I thought well maybe that is a good step toward that, because perhaps if we had that status, and also our board, we kind of have to reach out more, I guess, in terms of our board, and try to incorporate more people into seeing that it continues. As far as the ongoing curatorship of the museum, first of all, there has to be someone living here, that has to be decided. But the other thing is how do you do the curating? Who do you have for a curator? It may be that we can't have someone who lives here permanently like I do because they either have to be self-sufficient, or there has to be a salary raised, which is not always very easy.* One thing that I have been thinking about that may be a possibility, and that is an internship. Somebody who has training and maybe you would know more about that? If there are people coming from university or college training, who would be interested in spending time in the summer for a period of time, kind of on an internship basis. Like, we've had students, university students or high school students, but, of course, they need constant supervision, they can't run the museum.

**(Most of my time as curator is volunteered sometimes supplemented with a small honorarium.)*

DP: Yes.

VF: We need somebody with enough skill to be able to take it over for the season. So that's one of the things we're looking at now, 'cause I personally would really like to see this museum stay here. It belongs here, and I think it would lose something if it were to go somewhere else, and, of course, there's lots of opportunities, I think other museums would like to take parts of it. But, if it's at all possible, I'd like it to stay here. That is something that we have to work on.

DP: Okay. Well, if I had to suggest, maybe working with the Museums Association of Saskatchewan to find a person to man the museum during tourist season ...

VF: Well, we are a member of the Museums Association.

DP: Yes. So they certainly offer a lot of good programming, but you would require funding for that to occur ...

VF: Yeah, they don't provide personnel. They do have programs, of course, for training, but that's for someone who's already involved, and the problem is ...

DP: Yes, you want to find trained people

VF: Yeah, I don't know if you have programs in the Gabriel Dumont ...

DP: No not for that, unfortunately. We're novices really when it comes to museum programming. We do run a museum here in the publishing department, and we have a lot of valuable artefacts and pieces of art, but in terms of our training and our knowledge, we're really novices ourselves. We certainly don't have a program, we just take programming through the Museum's Association when we can, and just work with community people to try and figure out what we need to do ...

VF: Yeah.

DP: We're fortunate because we have the infrastructure in place to house our museum. Of course, we want a larger museum attached to a larger Métis centre, but we can just use the infrastructure in place for what we have now, and that helps a lot.

VF: Mmhmm.

DP: Unfortunately, a lot of community groups in small towns don't have that. So, maybe were at a bit of an advantage because were in the biggest city, and we already have a centre and a recognizable corporate name. That probably helps a lot. In terms of what you are looking for from Parks Canada, would you like to see a partnership perhaps? Like say between Fort Battleford and Bresaylor, given that there's a historical connection?

VF: I have no idea how that can work. I'm working on the application, which is a preliminary step I guess, and how it can all work out in the end. I haven't been able to understand just yet, how all of that works.

DP: Okay.

VF: We thought well we'll start with a preliminary ... at least put in an application, and see if they would acknowledge it as a worthwhile national historic site. Well apparently, they are quite interested in it, but they recommended not applying under site, but under event. You're probably familiar with that?

DP: Yes, just from what came up in the discussion, but they certainly have their bureaucratic reasons why they would recommend that ...

VF: Oh, do you think that it's a valid reason?

DP: In terms of bureaucracy, I would have to think that what Scott told you was very sincere. He seems very sincere about that. I know that part of the mandate of this project is for Parks Canada to work more with Métis groups, recognizing Métis history in the region connected to a site. Obviously, Bresaylor is a little bit down the road from Fort Battleford, but there's definitely that historical connection, and I can't see why they wouldn't want to explore that.

VF: Oh, yes, yes.

DP: I know the English Métis story is in the areas of interest to Parks Canada, so I can't see why they wouldn't want to explore this further.

VF: Well, yeah. You see I talked to Scott, because he had offered to help or to meet with us or whatever, but he said that actually And he passed our project along, I guess you might say, to an advisor from Parks Canada, and so we're working with her, Audra Norek.

DP: Okay.

VF: But she's simply an advisor in terms of the application; she doesn't really know the history.

DP: Yes.

VF: She doesn't pretend to, but she will help with the process. She had talked to people at Parks Canada, and they definitely found the idea interesting, but I guess they knew enough about it that they thought we should proceed, but they did advise us to not apply as a site, I gather because there are some complications as far determining a historic site, and having to get permission from people, and so on.

DP: Yes.

VF: It seems kind of obvious to me that the site was a better idea, but then on the other hand, I've been working on trying to just gear it to the event, but, of course, the events that these people ... The fact that they came is the event, I guess. How they lived, and how they survived, their story and their connection with Riel actually.

DP: Yep. Well, I think getting the process started is the important thing. I do know they do have an interest in English Métis, and I know from a historical perspective ... my training is in History, there has been very little development into the history of English Métis communities, compared to French-Canadian Métis communities ...

VF: Yeah. From my reading and studying of it, it's kind of natural that the French Métis would predominate, its just such a huge part of Saskatchewan.

DP: Yes, and in terms of the cultural legacy, it was a lot stronger. English Métis were more likely to try and assimilate into the English-Canadian norm, whereas French Métis it was a little harder, you know? Having the same hurdle of course, of being visibly Aboriginal, speaking Cree or whatever, but I have to think being English and Protestant would give you a one up on someone who was French and Catholic at that time, in terms of who ran society. So the English Métis generally didn't preserve their culture to the same extent, and I think that's probably one reason why there's more stuff about French Métis, because there's more of a cultural legacy.

VF: Yeah.

DP: But having said that, the communities intermarried, and the English/Scots Métis did contribute to the common Métis culture too. Now the community is the same, regardless of whether or not the ancestry was Scots, English or French, what the Euro ancestry is, because the maternal ancestry is almost all Cree or Salteaux, and the family ties went a million different ways. My training in history tells me never, never do anything that's cut and dry and black and white, its all kind of shades of grey, its much more complicated and intricate.

VF: Of course.

DP: I think having a connection to Fort Battleford is really important, because most people recognize that, I will use the generic term, the English Métis get the short end of the stick, in terms of historical interpretation, and they certainly played a huge role in the opening up of the west and the north. Like, who were all the interpreters and guides, like say for the military, and the army, and the Hudson's Bay Company. So that's a very, very important part of Canadian history. I think the people who do historical interpretation know that they want to find suitable communities, and being that the Bresaylor story fits into 1885, I think that's a good fit, because the repercussions for everybody if you were mixed heritage were quite severe. It shows that 1885 was a very complicated event out here, and that the cleavages went many, many ways. So I do think there is an interest in terms of what can be achieved, and what partnership can be established, I can't speak to that of course, because I work here at the Gabriel Dumont Institute, but from my perspective, with my training in history and working at the Institute here, I would think that some sort of natural fit would be in order.

VF: Yeah.

DP: So I wish you luck in that regard, and whatever support letters you want, I would be more than happy to write them for your group.

VF: Well, it would be very good to have your comment on our application, and I would like to keep in touch about that.

DP: Okay, well if you require anything, just send me an email Velma with what you need, and I'll be more than happy to help out.

VF: Oh, that's good.

DP: Are there any other things relating to Bresaylor in the interview that you think are important?

VF: Oh, I could probably think of lots of things, but I think those sort of touched the main ones. I guess I'm curious, you talk about your project, and I guess you explained it at that meeting ...

DP: I can explain it again. We're the community liaison. Parks Canada approached Gabriel Dumont Institute to work with Metris and community people, non-Métis community people, to obtain information relating to Métis history and culture in and around Parks Canada sites. Fort Battleford was one, Grasslands National Park was another, and Fort Walsh in the southwest of the province was the other, and we're kind of the liaison. The body of interviews we hope to put on our website to increase knowledge of Métis history and culture, and Parks Canada hopes to use the interviews for interpretation and for community-building purposes. So those are the two aims of the project.

VF: Okay, I guess I didn't realize that you were ... yeah. I know the meeting was Parks Canada and Gabriel Dumont Institute, but I didn't really quite understand the nature of the project, I didn't quite get that. So in a way, this is really kind of part of your project?

DP: Yes, well, we work with the community to obtain oral histories of Métis history and culture, and because we work for the community, we were approached to serve as a broker, because, sometimes, people are suspicious to talk to government agencies and things. We're more face-to-face in the Métis community, and it's a bridge building exercise. They certainly want to increase Métis interpretation at their sites, and including communities that are close by to historic sites is important because people moved around a lot. They just weren't static in one place, and that is kind of what the intent was of having Fort Battleford connect to all the surrounding Métis communities, such as Delmas whatever. The interest of people who have roots in Bresaylor was quite strong, I'd say a third of those that attended had an interest in Bresaylor, It wasn't just yourself, so ...

VF: Well, or course. When you start naming off names like Fidler, and Swain maybe.

DP: ... Caplette ...

VF: People start coming out of the woodwork... like Marilyn Richardson, who was quite outspoken. I'm kind of hoping she will be a part of helping us.

DP: Well she certainly contributed a lot of wonderful information, she wrote it out for us.

VF: Oh, I see.

DP: I think having vocal passionate champions are your friends for sure. So having people like Marylyn in the community, but like I know there was a Helena Caplette ...

VF: Oh yeah, she's on our board.

DP: She's actually the last person to interview for this project. I have to get her sometime near the end of the month here, and we're wrapping up. So, I just want conclude the interview, and Ill stop the tape now.