

Hugh Henry—Parks Canada Interview, January 19, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): Hello, this is Darren Prefontaine, and I'm interviewing Hugh Henry, former director of the Swift Current Museum for the Parks Canada Métis project. It's January 19th at 10 AM. Hello, how are you?

Hugh Henry (HH): Very well, Darren, thank you.

DP: Could you please tell me your name and your involvement with Métis in south-western Saskatchewan please?

HH: Okay, my name is Hugh Henry, and I was the former director of the Swift Current Museum in Swift Current for about 17 and a half years. And I guess my first sort of contact with the Métis community was when we moved into a new facility about 2004 and part of the future of the new facility was to plan and design and implement new exhibits that would look at the relationship between human activities and the natural resources and environment of southwest Saskatchewan.

I guess we started with the post glacial period but focusing mostly on the historic period of 1870s onward. And in telling that story, of course, looked at First Nations people but also Métis, resident or transient in the southwest of the province.

At that time we had a Métis on our board of directors, a person named Carol [Trottier] Low. She was of some help in terms of directing me to do my research, but was not herself that familiar with Métis history, other than her own family history. So a lot of it was dependant upon research from different resources - scrip records, those sorts of things; local history books that had some records too, of the families and activities in the area. And, as well, more professional documents looking at the fur trade period and some of the movements of the Métis out of the Red River area. And also the family communications and travel that had been established from the Battleford area into the United States which, of course, would have passed through the southwest part of the province. So a combination of factors, fur trade, of course bison hunting and its increasing dependence on the southwest part of the province as bison numbers declined. Again, putting all those factors together gave me some basis for exploring Métis history in the area. And, of course, researched images from Saskatchewan Archives [Board] to supplement the text with images of Métis in the southwest.

DP: Prior to this involvement in 1994 [2004?] was there any information at the museum regarding Métis or just kind of cursory?

HH: There was not. And the museum in Swift Current did not have a lot of professional oversights in the past. And it wasn't taken that seriously by the city council and the administration - city hall. Soon after I started there [at the S. C. Museum] in 1993, as someone with the background and professionalism in that area [museum work], that I understood the need to revise and reshape and reposition the museum. Being in Swift Current, the biggest community in the southwest part of the province, it [the Museum] needed to look beyond its own local history, like the development of the city itself, and take on a more regional role and tell the story of the region. And leave it up to the smaller museums and smaller towns to tell their individual histories, which was common. But, for the Swift Current Museum to take a leadership role in more of the history of the southwest in the larger context.

DP: So the museum itself focussed on city history and say pioneer history?

HH: That's right. It really didn't distinguish itself that much from say other museums in other communities in the southwest. Again, I really felt that people needed to re-think the concept of what museums were all about and their purposes within communities had to be retold. It's more of a modern concept of what museums are, the role they play in communities, and what they should be doing. Sort of an educational role as opposed to passively sitting back saying, "Well here's what happened in the past and it never changes." The idea of designing these new exhibits that were not static. It wasn't just to tell a certain story of a period of time. It was designed for the exhibits to be flexible so that new content could be added, and we'd move it [the stories] into the future. So whatever may be happening this year or next year, it clearly affects relationships between people and resources and their activities. And that could be incorporated in telling the story and the evolution of the southwest and again the interaction between the environment and resources and people and 'why they [people] do what they do, where they do it'.

DP: What was the response of the larger community to Métis and First Nations interpretation at the museum?

HH: There wasn't really that much response. And I guess it's part of people's default mechanism where they think, "Well, you know, the museum knows what it's doing, or some professional people know what they're doing. They're doing the research and so on."

Even though I contacted some First Nations contacts I had, to provide content, it wasn't as easy as I had hoped it would be. I had contacted the Nekaneet band, and had wanted them to be more active partners in telling the First Nations story. But, I did have help through the museum community. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan, which has a First Nations and Métis component to it, [and a mandate] of bringing those histories into the more mainstream museum community. They had contacts, which provided resource people that I could contact if needed.

But I was also interested in the part of the story of the treaty period and contacted some First Nations who had moved out of the southwest part of the province during the treaty process. I contacted them and again wanted them to be able to tell their story. But again it wasn't as successful as I had hoped. I know there's protocol and so on that needs to be followed in that regard, and I wasn't necessarily fluent in some of that. And given timelines

and managing it, the bigger story, I took what I could and made the contacts that I was comfortable making. But again, in the long and short of it, I relied a lot on established and published texts in order to find the information. For the opening of the exhibits I invited the First Nations and Métis elders [I had contacted previously] to come and be a part of the opening when we were at that point.

DP: What was the response to the Métis community to these initiatives?

HH: Well the biggest supporter I had in the whole process and the one who provided a lot of direction for me was elder Cecile Blanke who lives in Swift Current. She recently moved back to the community from Alberta where her husband was employed. They lived there for a number of years. When she came back into the area she was very active in promoting Métis culture through the library programs and school programs and so on. I had come to know her through some of the community activities that she was spearheading. I saw her as a viable spokesperson and resource person for information.

DP: Was there other community input other than Cecile or?

HH: Oh I had contacted some, like Carol [Low] who I mentioned.

DP: Yes.

HH: Earl Monkman, who recently passed away, was also involved with the Métis local here. And so, I had approached them but they were, I guess they were busy with other programs they were doing in the community, and perhaps weren't that comfortable exploring some of the Métis history of the past, so I didn't press the issue. The invitation was there and it wasn't taken up by them so I moved on. Not everybody, because they are Métis, feel comfortable being a spokesman for their history, the past or present and so on.

But again, getting back to Cecile, the exhibits were coming to a finish at that time and so my involvement with her became programming, subsequent to the exhibits being completed and the museum officially opening to the public. And 2010, being the *Year of the Métis*, I took the opportunity to initiate a program with her and did a research project. Some of that is actually on going. We're working on a couple of other things as well so hopefully it'll be huge.

DP: So you hired Barb Parchman to conduct this research in 2010?

HH: Yes, that was sort of the centre of a four-month project where we obtained the grants and was able to hire her. The idea there was not so much the exhibits, which were completed, but again as part of the *Year of the Métis*, was try to capture as much Métis history as I could and house it as a resource at the museum. She was given latitude in terms of what she wanted to do, but there were some guidelines in terms of what I was interested in. Primarily the areas of settlement, the Métis temporary settlements, some of the activities they would engage in after the fur trade and the bison trade - which could be ranching, it could be farming, it could be working in other industries as well. But, in short, that transition period was my main focus, which I felt hadn't been explored and looking at in the printed material. To capture that and I wasn't even sure if a lot of that was there. But again, I asked Barb if she could do some of that by interviewing Métis families and making contacts as she already

knew them - if she could flesh out some of that. Some of it was a success, some of it not so much. Not many Métis families knew their history that well - more contemporary perhaps, but not necessarily having it passed from one generation to the next during the transition period of 1870 to say the 1910s and teens. It wasn't really well known. But anyway, Barb did a lot of ground work and went through a lot of print material. Again, some government records, local history books, other resources on Métis history. So she was able to compile a lot of that over that short period of time, and that again was to be used by the museum.

DP: So what were some of the interesting findings that Barb came up with or you were able to share or?

HH: Well again, I wouldn't say anything that we hadn't known. One area of particular interest to me was Sask. Landing. The Cecile Blanke family, some of her family history is located at Sask. Landing. I was able to get some homestead records. Things like some Métis who were employed by the government on the ferry, the ferry to go across the river. And the Métis were employed at the post office and other sort of commercial activities at Saskatchewan Landing for a period of time. So that was something I really appreciated, getting those sorts of records copied and available to the public. But in time, as well, Barb has moved on. She's done more research so hopefully that history will be fleshed out a bit more.

DP: She's working with the museum still?

HH: No. Well, she's indicated that the initial employment with the museum spurred her on to investigate further as the story wasn't really told. She took it upon herself to get a grant to support further research in the area. And she stared out, to my understanding, with grants supporting her and a timeline to follow - to finish up in the next couple months I would expect. Those grants, you know they sort of follow provincial and federal budget cycles so they're guided by those. I haven't spoken to her recently to see how far along she is. But again, Cecile Blanke and her Métis local, Prairie Dog Local, has been involved with that as well. I wrote a letter to support her - Barb, when she applied for grants, and I think Cecile's local provided some support in terms of oversight to the project.

DP: Now you mentioned the public has access to this information, is that correct? Like researchers can come in and access it at the Swift Current Museum?

HH: Yes that's right. It's all filed there. [People can] contact staff for help in either vault in our secure area. It's just a matter of contacting staff.

There was one, I forget her name, researcher last spring that indicated that she wanted some material. But I retired at the end of March and I'm not too sure if she made her way to the museum or not. But she had contacted me because she had heard about this research. So it's one of those things that's available there. And, of course, people will use it as they wish. It may be the casual person that has to look at their family history a bit further. But if it's there or not, it's hard to say. But again, for more established research professionals, that cross-referenced information might be fruitful for their research.

DP: During your time with the Swift Current Museum, and perhaps even now, has there been any consideration to collaborate with other museums and agencies, maybe Parks Canada for instance? Say Fort Walsh, or Grasslands National Park to coordinate and promote Métis history in the area?

HH: Well one thing that we started when I was still at the museum was connecting with the Parks department - provincial Parks department, because they were responsible for Saskatchewan Landing primarily. But, also because the way it's set up in the department now, Cypress Hills Provincial Park is also responsible for [developing programs at] Saskatchewan Landing Provincial Park.

I guess [it started] with the drive and initiative of Cecile Blanke indicating that the Métis history of Saskatchewan Landing was not interpreted sufficiently. And she was wanting to see if some more [Metis history could be] part of the interpretive centre at Saskatchewan Landing. So I knew some people at the Parks department in Regina and through their initiative and cooperation, and Cecile invited other Métis representatives of families whose history, roots were in that Saskatchewan Landing area, we met in Swift Current. And, had a meeting indicating the possibilities, and the wishes of some of the Métis whose forefather's history was in the area of Saskatchewan Landing. So at that time, I certainly put the museum on board as being interested in being a partner in this. So it would involve the Swift Current Museum and local Métis societies and also individual Métis families as well as parks - Parks and Resources, whatever the title is right now. So that is somewhat on the desk of Jeanette Hamilton in Regina [Parks Dept.], the senior official at that meeting. So again, we both understand that it takes time for these initiatives to be budgeted for. But that is sort of our dream, to have Métis history at the existing buildings, but also potentially [to include more] as they develop the park.

DP: Now that you're retired you still maintain an interest in the history of south-western Saskatchewan. You're on the board of the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society. Now are there any Métis-specific initiatives within the society and the region that you are aware of or involved in?

HH: Not through the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society. There aren't any Métis-specific initiatives at this point. Although, I can speak for the last ten years or more being in the museum field that there has been certainly pressure through grants and so on, through the federal government and the provincial government, to either hire First Nation and Métis people for summer jobs or to involve them in the working, the operations of the museum. So, I would commend both of those levels of government for doing that.

But, getting back to Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society. Because they receive lottery dollars and so on, there is continuing encouragement from SaskCulture in this case, to involve First Nations and Métis in programming. And I've only been on that board [SHFS], it will be two years, in May. During that time, we have taken some steps in that direction. One of them being professor Keith Carlson [SHFS Board] from the University of Saskatchewan, and he has connections with First Nations and Métis. His primary strength is in the BC area, but I know he's indicated making some contacts in Saskatoon as well.

On the board as well, in fact Therese [Prince][Lefebvre] in Yorkton, but from the southwest part of the province, has been very active in promoting some of that Métis history. Anyway there's certainly some people there, and one of the programs we have that has been long established with the society is the Wood Mountain-Fort Walsh Trail that was documented in the 1960s. Of course, there is some Métis heritage related to that whole period - North West Mounted Police and Métis presence at Wood Mountain, and so on.

Another factor which I'm involved with, and it's just sort of taking the first steps towards that, is to give more recognition to the Battleford-Swift Current Trail, which was established in 1883 after the railway came to Swift Current. It became the closest, over land connecting route to the Swift Current area, and was really important for 8 or 9 years for government communications, for commercial interests, moving goods back and forth over that trail. There are a few markings along that trail that were established over the years by interested individuals - and some provincial markers as well. One of my goals is to research that a bit more and get the municipalities that are located on that trail - get them informed about the importance of that trail. There are some indications of the trail still being there in the physical sense.

Perhaps markers could be established again with the cooperation of the government, Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society and other interested parties. And perhaps Métis as well to help interpret that trail, because, of course, Métis were primarily responsible for setting it up. And then it was taken over by more commercial interests by white folks. They had an economic advantage over some of the Métis of the early part of that history. But anyways, there are connections there to the Métis which should be better documented.

DP: So you see those as community projects involving Métis community and a host of other agencies?

HH: For sure, and again Cecile Blanke is very interested in the project and she has, of course, a lot of connections with Métis further north, which I don't have, in the Battleford and other areas. And again, with an eye to her getting on board and the involvement of other individuals and other agencies like Gabriel Dumont Institute. That sort of project [assistance], maybe not on the physical side with the markers, but maybe again researching [G.D.I., others] the commercial amenities that were involved there or how they affected scrip or other sorts of factors - what was important at the time.

DP: Okay. Are there other Métis-specific initiatives you're interested in or those are just the main ones right now?

HH: Those are the main ones, but in the back of my mind I still want to get back to the 1870s, 1880s period, which Barb Parchman was not fully able to explore.

In terms of settlement in the area, I had done some [research]. I talked with Margaret Kennedy, who's an archaeologist working out of Saskatoon. She's done some work in terms of fur trading posts and who were staying in the Cypress Hills in the early days. So she's got some knowledge of that, and I haven't fully explored it, but that's the kind of work she had done a number of years ago. So I keep her in mind, and should begin communicating with her.

But there are people like that and another fellow, Frank Tough, at the University of Alberta. Frank Tough has recently done some research on trails, Métis, First Nations and otherwise, that go into Alberta. He's on sabbatical from the University this year so he's not able to do much on it, but he's a person, with friends and colleagues that worked with him on this project, who could be a resource for initiating programs in this area. For example, Cecile and I had agreed to invite him to come down and do a presentation here in Swift Current this winter. But again, because he's on sabbatical; he wasn't able to accommodate us. But, that's something that's in the next year, or perhaps further along.

And I'm still in communication with the museum here, and they're very open in terms of programming, and you know, being available and hosting these potential presentations and talks and so on - even though they might not be a priority right now in terms of their work. So again, the museum is there and available to serve the community. And Cecile and I both understand that, and other agencies and individuals in the community understand that. So we can potentially serve as a resource and an important institution for information.

DP: If you had a vision for the interpretation for Métis history in south-western Saskatchewan, what would it be? What would you like to see?

HH: Well it could be a lot of different things. I mean the standard things are things like markers saying Métis lived here or Métis travelled here and so on. But there's interesting projects. I guess two and a half years ago when the Museums Association of Saskatchewan were going to use technology where people who were travelling across the province could sort of plug into the radio station or whatever. And as they're travelling along the Trans-Canada they could listen to different stories about that area. One of the proposals that I submitted, because it was going to be a pilot project, which in the end didn't get off the ground. But the pilot project was actually going to be Barb Parchman providing details on how her great-grandmother had travelled as a young girl from Montana to Battleford. And she knew some of the details of that because her great-grandmother had passed some of that along. And this was going to be sort of a flashback in time about this young Métis girl going to an area she'd never been before and telling about her experiences along the trail. Including, whether it was fact or fiction, spending the night at Swift Current along the creek and then following the trail up to Saskatchewan Landing and so on, how the valley would look at that time. So I thought it was a very strong piece of history from a first person perspective and we thought it was going to be ideal for this project. But in the end, the project didn't go ahead. But that reflects on the potential. It doesn't have to be physical markings on the ground and a way of telling Métis history. It could be using modern technology to accommodate people if they don't want to stop or sort of go off the beaten track. So this resource would still be available to them. But, that's one example of an area that could be explored, with the right people interested or resources for telling the story.

DP: Now, as a professional in museum interpretation and someone who's worked with Métis community people to gather and interpret Métis history and culture, what would you suggest to Parks Canada to, if for instance you wanted to look at the interpretation of Métis history and culture what would you suggest they focus on and what sorts of things would you like to see as an interested citizen at say Fort Walsh and Grasslands National Park

relating to Métis history and culture that you feel they haven't covered or what you feel should be added?

HH: I don't know if I would be presumptuous enough to suggest to them what to do because they certainly have professionals that I never had or specific training and so on. They certainly do have the people with the knowledge, financial resources, and can call upon other agencies to support their initiatives. So, I wouldn't necessarily try to direct them. I think the Grasslands National Park, and certainly Fort Walsh, I know they're quality people out there. And also Cypress Hills Provincial Park as well. They're good people with a lot of training. And certainly I think their hearts are in the right area because we all understand as museum people the importance of bringing culture into the particular geographic regions they are situated in, whether it's Grasslands or whatever. So culture is an important part, and we all understand that as museum professionals. Also, being directed from above, the people back in Ottawa or Regina understand that as well. I wouldn't, again, suggest that they have to go one way or another. I think they're probably doing what they can with the resource people, and time and other sort of competing interests, to flesh that out as best they can. It'll come about, I'm certain of that. It'll come about when the process takes its course. I can't really suggest locations that they need to respond to because they have the geographic imprint where they're set up. Whatever Métis or First Nations history is connected to that geography then they'll discover it, and they'll interpret it as they see fit.

I think it's very important to involve First Nations and Métis communities telling their stories. But again, we have to understand not all Métis, not all First Nations are interested in telling that or to promote themselves, and I'm somewhat hesitant to sort of group them all together. For sure there's Métis history, but there's Métis histories in the plural sense as much as there's Métis history in the linear sense. The same thing for First Nations. Maybe one person's story is that person's story, but it is also the collective story. So maybe a balance in doing both, looking at the bigger picture, but also from my experience in the museum world, that first person story is the one that grabs people the most. As you can identify, see it on television and in the movies and so on, you want to connect on the closest sense possible with an individual or family story, and to tell the story from that perspective. So I think, going back to print sources and so on, we've seen a lot of generalized Métis and First Nations history, whether it's southern Saskatchewan or other places. I think if you can identify individual person's stories and from that perspective tell a larger story I think that's the strength of heritage presentation.

DP: And that, of course, involves working with community people, which is also something I think that's very important to museum interpretation as well right?

HH: It is, and you have to have local support. Going back to the example of the Battleford-Swift Current Trail, I mean outsiders coming in and saying, "This is important to your heritage", doesn't work. You have to have the local interest and the people who are going to be there in the next 100 years living in that community and their descendants - it's a part of their heritage. And if they don't take an interest in it and they don't want to tell it or share it, they can't expect somebody else to come in there and do it arbitrarily. It's never successful that way, having outside people coming in and saying this is what you're all about. You know, again the strength of it, and the endurance of it, is if it's told by the people who are in

that community or are a part of that community, and have the strength and convictions and the understanding that it is important.

So it's very much the local support and the local support in very many ways - financial or doing programming. And it doesn't necessarily need to be in Grasslands National Park. They obviously need Val Marie, so to speak. Those are the people who know the local history. And, of course, Métis families are there as well in Val Marie. Again, they really have to be grabbed by it, that it is important, and we have to tell our story. Agencies, whether the museums or government agencies, could come and support that - be contacts for exhibits or materials or even this technology I talked about before, providing some support for that side of it. So it's a combination of things. You really do have to have a buy-in.

DP: Is there anything else you would like to add Hugh? Anything else you think is important?

HH: Well, what is very important, and I guess it's evident, is Métis history in the southwest. It's about time that this history is explored and made a living history so it's not Métis who lived back in the 1880s and they're long gone. They aren't long gone. They're still parts of our community. And if they wish to tell their story and they wish to have other people come and help tell their story then that's maybe the boost that needs to happen. I think there's a desire for it in a sense. Even though it's not in our face, so to speak, the people are interested in Canadian history and you can see it on television. You know, dealing with it on the news all the time. Land claims or treaty entitlements, and so on, it's got to be a part of our everyday lives, and that goes back to what I mentioned about the Swift Current Museum. We don't want to be a static museum - that things happen in the past. There are things happening every day. And we're living it. So, if we can engage people in that sort of format - Treaty land entitlement, whether First Nations, or some of the wrong doings or grievances that Métis have, or the past misgivings of government, of business, or whatever really. Then it isn't a history that's from 150 years ago, it's a history that's relevant today.

DP: Well Hugh, I thank you very much for taking time to share with me your insights. It's very much appreciated, and I think it will be a welcome contribution to our project so I thank you very much.

HH: Oh you're more than welcome Darren. And I wish you the best. And this is your undertaking now and those agencies like Grasslands and Cypress Hills who are on the frontlines. Even the Métis locals who are working hard to get some headway in terms of recognition and instill, pride and heritage and presence.

DP: Thank you.

HH: Okay Darren, we'll talk to you another time.

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