

Warren Mills—Parks Canada Interview, January 31, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): It's January 31, and this is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Warren Mills for the Grasslands National Parks, Parks Canada project. How are you Warren?

Warren Mill (WM): I am pretty good today.

DP: That's good. Could you please tell me your name and your own community?

WM: My name is Warren Mills. I'm a retired person, and I'm from Willow Bunch Saskatchewan.

DP: Now, I understand you are not Métis yourself, but you have connections to Métis people, is that correct?

WM: That's correct, my first wife was Métis

DP: What was your wife's maiden name?

WM: Racette

DP: Racette, and what was her home community?

WM: She was in Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan

DP: Qu'Appelle?

WM: Qu'Appelle, yes.

DP: Your children identify as Métis?

WM: My wife has always denied her heritage.

DP: Okay.

WM: She had a very uncomfortable childhood because of her race.

DP: So she faced all sorts of discrimination?

WM: Yes.

DP: And that troubled her throughout her life?

WM: Yup, pretty well, yes. Until her late 20s, and I was military, and eventually we got to a point where she could deny it, she was very conscious of the colour of her skin so she did all sorts of things to keep herself pale.

DP: So she would say that she was French or French Canadian?

WM: Yes, or people asked her about her heritage and she would say Italian or Spanish or whatever.

DP: And your children just because their mom never embraced her heritage, they never embraced theirs either?

WM: That's right

DP: Were there ever any instances where you saw the larger community discriminate against her because she was Métis?

WM: Did I see it personally?

DP: Yeah.

WM: Oh sure, you bet, yeah.

DP: So, it was quite prevalent.

WM: Yes, it was. It was pretty well everywhere.

DP: Did your wife talk about growing up Métis? Or being Métis?

WM: Yes, she did. She went to school and, in the town of Qu'Appelle, and how she was harassed, you know, coming home from school. Kids on horseback would chase her, and you know, just really cruel treatment, and of course all the name calling and stuff like that, you know?

DP: Did she talk to you about her culture at all, or?

WM: I got along really well with her grandfather, who was, his name was Henry.

DP: Okay.

WM: Racette ...

DP: Okay.

WM: And he was, he married a Métis woman. Henry did. Her name escapes from me right now. He had very interesting stories about growing up Métis and in the Qu'Appelle area.

DP: And he was very proud of who he was?

WM: He was, actually. He was a horseman for the North West Mounted Police and he worked very hard for the ... his main job was transporting horse herds up to Edmonton from Fort Qu'Appelle.

DP: Okay.

WM: He had all sorts of stories. He and I would sit in the shed in his backyard, and he would tell me stories about that, about how they used to have to hide from the ones who were loyal to Louis Riel.

DP: Oh, so he lived during the 1885 uprising?

WM: Oh yeah. Yeah, he was, let's see, born in, he was 85 when he, 88 when he died. So that would have been, he was born about 1878, I think it was.

DP: Okay.

WM: Yeah.

DP: So had a lot of stories about 1885 and Louis Riel?

WM: He had stories about what it was like for him to work the North West Mounted Police, and not embrace the revolution, I guess it was called.

DP: He had good memories, working for the Mounted Police?

WM: He did, he was a very proud of his ability to be, to know horses and to be able to handle horses, you know?

DP: Did he go into the South African War or World War One?

WM: No, I don't think believe he did, no.

DP: So he stayed home during the war?

WM: Yup

DP: Okay, and did he have a large family? Him and his wife?

WM: They had, I think they only had four children. Three or four children.

DP: And their base was in Qu'Appelle Valley?

WM: Right.

DP: Did he ever share with you on how he made a living? Like, other than working for the Mounted Police. Did he use the land and the resources?

WM: That's basically it. They had a place just north of the town of Qu'Appelle.

DP: Okay.

WM: North of Fort Qu'Appelle, they had a sod house that they lived in all year 'round.

DP: Okay.

WM: And from what he told me, it sounded like they, pretty well lived off of their garden and berries, and nuts that they gathered.

DP: So they lived off the land.

WM: Pretty well, yeah. Of course, once he was working with the Mounted Police, and I gathered that was on again off again thing, when they had horses to move, he was contracted, and then when the horses were being finished being moved, and he didn't have anything.

DP: Okay.

WM: He was a very interesting man, Henry Racette.

DP: So, you really admired him and you talked a great deal with him?

WM: I've always enjoyed that culture. My father-in-law, it just didn't seem to faze him one way or the other, whether he was Métis or Indian. He was in the Second World War, my father-in law. And he was a graduate of Wilcox school at Notre Dame. He graduated from there, and when he was in the army, they made him an instructor for teaching payroll and accounting.

DP: And that was Henry?

WM: No, that was Norman.

DP: So Henry was the grandfather and Norman was your father-in-law?

WM: Yes. Yeah.

DP: So you got to know them both well?

WM: Very well, yeah.

DP: And Norman proud of who he was and proud of his identity as well?

WM: He seemed to be very much at peace in his own skin, yeah.

DP: Okay

WM: He, when he married, he married a, a woman by the name of Alice Hamilton who was a non-Aboriginal, non-Métis.

DP: Yes.

WM: So, that's why the some of the children had the complexion of the Métis and others, like my daughter and some of her aunts and uncles, were very pale, you know?

DP: Okay

WM: But, Norman was a, he had land, that's why they wound up in Qu'Appelle, 'cause he managed to get a farm there under the *Veterans Land Act*.

DP: Okay

WM: Yeah.

DP: And he was a successful farmer?

WM: Yes, he had to be, I think , well, he had 13 children.

DP: Oh, wow.

WM: So, you know, that wasn't too unusual in the '40s and early '50s, but it's very unusual today.

DP: And your daughter would have been the middle child? or one of the younger ones?

WM: My wife?

DP: Yeah. Or pardon me, you wife.

WM: She was second oldest.

DP: One of the older ones?

WM: Yeah.

DP: Okay, So how did the family make a living, just farming?

WM: My wife's family?

DP: Yes.

WM: Well, he actually worked off the farm as a bookkeeper, and then him and his wife farmed the farm. Like him and Alice would drive the tractor or the horses, or whatever, and when he was home on the weekends or whenever. He planted mainly grain. Of course, they had chickens and pigs, and milk cows and stuff.

DP: Are there any events or stories that your father-in-law and your wife's grandfather shared with you that's really stand out?

WM: With Henry, I think it was his grandfather, the only stories I actually recall were the stories of him working for the North West Mounted Police and having to hide from the supporters of Louis Riel and stuff, but, and Norman, he didn't talk very much about the army, really.

DP: He was overseas or he stationed in Canada?

WM: No, he was stationed in Kingston.

DP: Okay.

WM: Ontario. That's where my wife was born. Was Kingston, Ontario.

DP: Okay.

WM: That's where the school was, teaching bookkeeping and ...

DP: Like the Royal Military College?

WM: Yeah, it was like that.

DP: Okay. You live in Willow Bunch now, which has a pretty long and deep, sense of Métis history.

WM: Right.

DP: What do you think needs to be done in the community and in Grasslands in general to better recognize and promote Métis history as a person who has had a lot of interest in Métis history?

WM: I would say the best way of handling it, would be to try and minimize the injustices from the past, rather than keep bringing those up and reopening all those old wounds. It would be just to show the positive side of the Métis culture and language and you know? It's so rich, that whole Métis background and history. It's a shame that we can't talk about it, without always bringing up all the hurt and injustices from the last 100 years.

DP: And that seems to come up quite a bit when there are discussions

WM: Yeah, exactly. ... I would rather see the Métis celebrated here. Have Métis days or whatever, and have it all positive with the music and the food, and I think that would be a lot more beneficial. I think more people would embrace that, and I think more people are embracing that, you know, just from, you know, watching things like TV, CTV, *Indigenous Circle* and some of the other programs, programming on the Saskatchewan network. I think it is changing, the attitude from people towards that.

(DP: I don't think have the same amount of racism towards Aboriginals people)??????????

WM: I don't think they do, but it has gradually, it's improving.

DP: It's still there, but I do think that things have improved a lot.

WM: Yes.

DP: In terms of Willow Bunch, you think emphasizing the positives that build a sense of community and honouring everybody's ancestral heritage would be the way to move forward?

WM: Exactly, yeah. I think we all have deep roots, you know? We are all one people. We are, on one planet, so we need to learn to embrace one another and share what we have.

DP: In terms of Grasslands National Park ...

WM: I love that place.

DP: It's really remarkable.

WM: It is.

DP: What things would you like to see them do that would increase the Métis presence at the park? Are there any sorts of partnerships or things you would like to see Parks Canada do at Grasslands National Park to make the place more Métis friendly or more friendly to non-Métis to better experience Métis culture?

WM: I think, basically, what they're doing, keeping it the way it's always been. I think if they had some kind of camping experience there, like, teach people how people lived there. Actually go and set up tent or a tipi or whatever, you know, and what it was like to live then. Give people more appreciation of the life.

DP: You would like to see interpretation of how the Métis used the land and its resources there, and encourage people to participate?

WM: Yes. Exactly, yeah.

DP: Okay.

WM: And I think the closer the experience could be to the actual authentic, to the way it was, then I think that would be a real benefit to people.

DP: Okay.

WM: 'Cause I mean, my grandparents came to this country just before the turn of the 20th century, and there are all sorts of stories in books about our culture, my culture, of how they lived off the land. The Métis didn't experience as much as they did, not as much as a man coming from Ireland, and not knowing how to grow wheat, you know? The only thing they knew how to grow were potatoes. So, I mean, there are many things to learn about each culture.

DP: Is there anything else you would like to share about Métis history and culture or this project that you think are important, Warren?

WM: I'm just really interested in how this will all come together in relations to Grasslands National Park, and I'm looking forward to participating in it or whatever they get going there

DP: Okay. Well I thank you for your time and I guess we'll conclude the interview, so thank you so much Warren.