

Emile Desautles—Parks Canada Interview, February 2, 2012

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Darren Prefontaine (DP): Okay, well then I guess we can formally start then. It is February 2nd, 2012 and this is Darren Prefontaine interviewing Emile Desautles for the Parks Canada-Grasslands partnership. How are you Emile?

Emile Desautles (ED): I am fine thank you.

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

ED: Emile Desautles from Willow Bunch. I've been a citizen here all my life, I was born and raised here.

DP: Okay. Who were or who are your parents and grandparents and where were they from?

ED: My parents are Peter and Giselle Desautles. They're both from here. My grandparents were Pierre Desautles and he came from Rhode Island.

DP: Okay, okay.

ED: And the farm that we're on now is the homestead that my granddad started.

DP: Okay. Where does the Métis ancestry come in your family?

ED: It's on my mom's side.

DP: And what was your mom's maiden name?

ED: Hello?

DP: Hi, what was your mother's maiden name?

ED: Giselle Baloux.

DP: Baloux.

ED: B-A-L-O-U-X.

DP: Okay, okay and she was originally from Willow Bunch as well?

ED: Yes, she was born and raised here.

DP: Okay. Does anyone in your family or did anyone speak Michif?

ED: No.

DP: No, just French and English?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Okay, you just speak French and English then?

ED: Yeah. My grandmother might have been able to speak Michif, but there was a stigma you know on the Michif there even my grandma wouldn't admit she was Michif.

DP: So there definitely was some racism in the community towards the Métis?

ED: Yes.

DP: So your family and your grandma, you think they encountered this racism in the past?

ED: Yes.

DP: Do you have any specific examples?

ED: No. I know my grandma one time went to give her parents' wedding picture to the museum who is run by the French and the French are real strong you know? And they just told her there's no room.

DP: Oh, okay.

ED: You know, they wouldn't take her picture?

DP: And that was some time ago?

ED: Yeah.

DP: But there, there definitely was a general sense of discrimination against the Métis.

ED: Oh, I'd think so. She had raised her kids not to admit, like my mom would never go for a card.

DP: So you mom and her siblings identified as French Canadians?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Okay. And do you think that was pretty common for Métis in and around Willow Bunch if they could?

ED: Oh, yes.

DP: So a lot hid their identity?

ED: Yep.

DP: Were there any members of your family that were in the military, Emile?

ED: No.

DP: No. Not in World War One or World War Two?

ED: No.

DP: Okay. Do you know any traditional Métis stories or songs?

ED: No.

DP: No? Okay.

ED: No, I don't have a lot of information for you.

DP: No, no, that's fine, that's fine. Every little bit of information certainly helps. Don't worry about a question if you can't answer them. What sort of resources did your family harvest? Your family were mainly farmers, is that correct?

ED: Yeah, my dad was a rancher.

DP: And your Métis grandparents and your mom and all them when they were small, did they have a ranch or a farm or?

ED: Métis, my mom's dad was a carpenter here.

DP: Okay.

ED: Then they did have some land. I think they did have a half section.

DP: Okay. Did they live off the land? Or, did your family live off the land like hunt and all that sort of thing, pick berries?

ED: Yes.

DP: So everybody made a living off the land, too right?

ED: Oh Yeah.

DP: Did your mom's family or anyone in your family use traditional medicines? Rather than, you know, a western doctor?

ED: Yeah, like I remember, I don't know how traditional that is, but I remember mom making us like, mustard plaster when you had colds and stuff.

DP: Okay. So that was quite common?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Did midwives deliver the babies or did, were you or your siblings, were you born in the hospital?

ED: I think we were all born in the hospital.

DP: In Willow Bunch?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Okay. I don't know if this applies, a lot of Métis didn't own land. So I guess in your instance your family didn't live on a road allowance, they weren't squatters. You owned land and lived on the land.

ED: Yeah.

DP: But there were a lot of Métis in Willow Bunch that didn't own land, is that correct?

ED: Right. I remember a lot of them on the hill there, that [Jean-Louis] Légaré had given up. I remember when I was a kid there was a lot of Métis living up there and around there

DP: So where is the hill exactly? The hill north of town or south of town?

ED: South of town.

DP: South of town.

ED: Where the water reservoir is.

DP: Okay.

ED: On the north-side of that hill it was all given up, it was Métis.

DP: Was that the Métis Hamlet or was that a different place?

ED: No that's the hamlet I'm talking about.

DP: Oh, okay. What happened to the Métis Hamlet on the hill? Did the people just move away in the '50s or?

ED: Yeah, and I think it just wrangled down to the last couple of them. I think Marcel Klyne was the last of them and he died he left there.

DP: Okay, that lived on the hill?

ED: Yeah.

DP: What were some of the families that lived in the area? Do you remember the family names?

ED: There was some Caplettes. There was a couple of them going to school, and Gosselins, there were some LaRocques for a while.

DP: Okay.

ED: McGillis.

DP: McGillis, okay.

ED: Lacerte.

DP: Lacerte.

ED: Berard.

DP: Berards, okay. And most of these folks moved away? So only a few families stayed in Willow Bunch?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Okay. Now getting back to the schooling, what was the schooling like for Métis kids in Willow Bunch? Was it generally a positive experience do you think or was there some negative?

ED: Oh there was some negative stuff there from the nuns.

DP: Okay, okay. So there certainly was that discrimination there too?

ED: Yeah especially for the Métis kids that showed the dark skin you know, the Métis?

DP: Yeah, Yeah.

ED: Yeah I think they were picked on quite a bit.

DP: Okay, we'll ask some questions now that kind of shift more to a positive emphasis, a positive view of Métis. How did you remember traditional Christmases? How did you celebrate Christmas and other special occasions like Easter and New Years? Were they quite festive or religious or a combination?

ED: Yeah I'd say a combination. Like they were, we did pretty much what everybody else did.

DP: So people went to mass?

ED: Yep.

DP: And then they had dances and fiddle playing and all that?

ED: Yep.

DP: Do you remember a lot of the fiddle players, like the Métis fiddle players and musicians in the community?

ED: A little.

DP: So it was quite prevalent? They played for all the dances or just the Métis ones?

ED: Oh no, they played for a lot of the dances.

DP: So everybody enjoyed their music.

ED: Yeah. Oh yes.

DP: Now you mentioned your mom wouldn't let anyone get their Métis cards. When did your family get involved with the Métis society? Relatively or, or you've been involved for sometime?

ED: I think we've had our cards for about ten years.

DP: Ten years, okay.

ED: My son got financing for some of his schooling.

DP: Okay.

ED: Even longer than ten years.

DP: Okay.

ED: You know, kind of one thing I've found: a lot of people go for the funding and then you never see them again.

DP: Yeah I think that ...

ED: I made a point once he did get some funding, I've been on the board since then.

DP: Okay.

ED: And that's pay back, you know.

DP: So you think a lot of people came out of the woodwork when there were benefits?

ED: Oh the hall was full. You know, when we'd have a meeting, something that panned out you know? Now we have hardly anybody coming to the meeting because nobody, most of the people that had the funding, haven't seen them since then or their parents.

DP: Do you think with time, that the social climate between Métis and Francophone's has improved? And like the larger society in Willow Bunch?

ED: Oh Yeah, I think so.

DP: So a lot of the old animosities are pretty much gone.

ED: Yeah, I think. Yeah, I'm sure it's better.

DP: Okay, how, now you live in Willow Bunch, do you remember hearing any stories, say from your grandparents or even your parents, about how the Métis might have made a living say in what's now Grasslands National Park? Like by Wood Mountain or did they just talk basically about things closer to home in Willow Bunch?

ED: Yeah the only guy that I knew from around Wood Mountain was Jim Lethbridge, a saddle maker. And we were ranchers, so I know dad had him build a few saddles for us.

DP: Jim Lethbridge was his name?

ED: Jim Lethbridge.

DP: Did he identify as Métis or was he a Lakota Sioux?

ED: Oh he was probably a Lakota Sioux. I think he was an Indian man.

DP: But he made saddles for your family?

ED: Yeah and he's well known for what he did make you know? He was a good saddle maker.

DP: Getting back to ranching and horsing, the cowboys in and around Willow Bunch were very good cowboys I understand, is that correct?

ED: Yep, yep. Dad used to put on rodeos.

DP: Your dad did?

ED: Yeah.

DP: So were the cowboys mainly Métis or just everybody there?

ED: Everybody.

DP: So everybody took part in that culture.

ED: Yes.

DP: Do you remember some of the Métis cowboys? Do you remember their names?

ED: Yeah you know there were Ogles from Wood Mountain, Lacaines, Klynes, I can't think of any names.

DP: No, no that's okay. But they were really good cowboys? They usually won your dad's rodeo?

ED: Oh they won some stuff you know, Yeah. Gaudrys.

DP: Gaudrys too. Okay, as a Métis person, are there any areas around Grasslands National Park that you consider historically and culturally significant and that should be preserved?

ED: The Hamlet

DP: The Hamlet. You think there should be more work to preserve the Métis Hamlet?

ED: Oh I think so.

DP: What, what remains of the Hamlet, Emile? Are there just foundations to buildings or ?

ED: No, there's a couple old houses there like, Marcel Klyne's house is still there and, Chet Lesperance and his boys, they're still there.

DP: Okay, so who owns the land now? Lesperances?

ED: No, actually, the town and the RM just took it over.

DP: Okay, so the town and the RM.

ED: Actually, that should have never been allowed as far as I'm concerned. That should be made a heritage site, if it wasn't for the Hamlet there'd be no Willow Bunch.

DP: Just because it was the Métis who founded Willow Bunch?

ED: Yeah.

DP: And they did all the hard work to build Willow Bunch.

ED: Sure they did.

DP: Hard working people.

ED: You know you hear the story that a lot of people say that the Michifs were just bums, they didn't work very hard. Many times when it was a hard job, it was the Michifs doing it.

DP: They did all the hard work. Do you think they were taken advantage of by, as hired hands and that or generally treated fairly or?

ED: They were taken advantage of.

DP: Okay.

ED: I remember Geordy McGillis, digging graves, I think at the time, for 10 dollars a hole. I remember seeing his work like, the corners were cut perfectly.

DP: Very good work. Now he was an elder in the community, like he lived to quite an old age did he not?

ED: Yeah.

DP: And he was a Michif speaker from what I heard.

ED: Yeah he would have been.

DP: So how old, when did he pass on roughly? And about how old was he?

ED: Oh he must have been well into his 80s.

DP: And he passed on ...

ED: I'd say maybe 20 years ago.

DP: Sometime in the '80s, late 80s or so.

ED: Yeah, I would think so, and he was a fiddle player.

DP: Very good one.

ED: Yeah.

DP: And he still has family in Willow Bunch or did the McGillis all leave?

ED: No, I know his boy Danny is still here. Danny's been the caretaker for the park probably for the last twenty, twenty some years.

DP: Okay, okay. So were there a lot of, well not a lot, but there were a few old Métis people like Mr. McGillis still around in Willow Bunch? Like in the '80s and so or was he more or less the last of the old Métis that lived down there?

ED: There would have been a few other than him at that time, like Jules Lacerte.

DP: Okay.

ED: Albert Gosselin.

DP: Now Lacerte, that's what the Métis Farm, that's where the name comes from right?

ED: That Métis Farm, that was the co-op farm. Yeah there was quite a few Lacertes

DP: What happened to the Métis Co-op? Like do you remember or?

ED: I remember them like, getting on the bus for school and stuff but, yeah, I really don't know.

DP: It just kind of fell by the way side in the '50s or '60s or so?

ED: Yep.

DP: But that was quite a big operation at one time or?

ED: Yeah, from what I remember there was at least three or four or maybe more families in there.

DP: Okay. And the land is now owned by local farmers and ranchers?

ED: Yeah I think Durands and Eugene Lesperance. And I think it was probably broken up three or four times.

DP: Okay. Was anybody in your family involved in the 1885 Resistance, Emile?

ED: Not that I know of.

DP: How long has your family lived in the Willow Bunch area? Like your mother's side for quite a while and your dad's side in the early 1900s or?

ED: Yeah we homesteaded this in '05.

DP: Okay. And it stayed in the family since?

ED: Yes.

DP: You're running, I guess, your grandpa's farm?

ED: Yeah.

DP: And your mom's people, or your grandma's people, were already in Willow Bunch when your grandpa came from Rhode Island?

ED: Yeah, my grandma remembers, well she was born in Willow Bunch.

DP: Okay.

ED: And she had told me my granddad built the house in Willow Bunch there on the side hill and when he moved here her dad bought that house. And they lived there for a while.

DP: Okay. And Métis when they built houses, generally, they built in the side of the hills to keep things sheltered I guess. So that was quite common down there in Willow Bunch?

ED: Yep, yep.

DP: Do you recall any sort of relationship the Métis might have had with the Mounted Police around Willow Bunch, like in terms of maybe being scouts or that sort of thing? Did you hear anything like that or any of that involvement?

ED: No.

DP: No.

ED: There used to be, I shouldn't say no, there, I forget where I read that story. The Lapointes used to be scouts for the RCMP.

DP: And the Lapointes were a Métis family in Willow Bunch?

ED: Yeah.

DP: And they were scouts?

ED: Yeah, I heard stories about the Lapointes working for the RCMP.

DP: Okay, did your maternal ancestors, did they take Métis scrip at Willow Bunch or did they take that elsewhere?

ED: No, I would say that took that here.

DP: That it was in Willow Bunch?

ED: I would think so.

DP: Okay, okay. Did you ever see the scrip certificates?

ED: No.

DP: You just knew that it had happened?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Your grandma never talked about it, and obviously it was something that wasn't brought up?

ED: Yeah, grandma. Yeah, no. We must have been really young when that was going on hey? That would have been the early '50s?

DP: When they got scrip? Oh no, that probably would have been 1890s or something like that. Going way back.

ED: I've heard of it, but I can't help you there.

DP: No worries. As a Métis person how do you think Parks Canada could make Grasslands more Métis friendly? Have you been to like, Grasslands and seen it?

ED: I've rode through part of it there. We used to do some wagon trains there years ago.

DP: Okay.

ED: And I've rode through the Grasslands Park on the way to Eastend.

DP: Okay, so you think just working with Métis community groups and interviewing people, and trying to build Métis specific interpretation would be a good thing?

ED: Yes.

DP: Okay, are there any other things you would like to see at Grasslands that relate to the Métis or anything interest you in the region? Are there aspects of the Métis story that aren't really told in the southwest in general that should be told and told specifically say at Grasslands? Anything you can think of?

ED: No, I'm sure there's lots of them. You'll have to find the right people to get that.

DP: Okay. Grasslands National Park, just one last question Emile, has prepared a cultural resource value statement and they want to know if Métis people are interested in the following, and they want to know if these are areas they should follow up on. So as a Métis person would you be interested in learning more about trading posts in the area?

ED: Yes.

DP: Relationship with bison?

ED: Yes.

DP: Ranching and farming?

ED: Yes.

DP: Métis time during the Great Depression?

ED: Yes.

DP: These have to relate to the governance and administration of the park, you, is that something that interests you as a Métis person?

ED: Yeah, I would think so.

DP: The paleontological and geological features of the area, this specifically relates to a lot of the First Nations you know, tipi rings and that sort of thing than the land itself, does that interest you?

ED: Absolutely.

DP: And early exploration and surveys, obviously a lot of Métis were involved.

ED: Yeah.

DP: And historic use of the area?

ED: Yes.

DP: So all those things pretty much interest you?

ED: Yeah.

DP: Okay, is there anything else you would like to add Emile? Anything you think is important as a Métis person that we might have missed talking about?

ED: No, like I say, not that I can think of. We were gone from the area for a lot of years.

DP: So your family moved away?

ED: Yeah. Well my family didn't, but I did. We were gone, I left here when I was 16.

DP: Okay and you came back?

ED: Yeah, we came back in the mid '80s.

DP: Mid-80s, okay. So where did you make a living?

ED: Well we started a construction company in Calgary and then—

DP: Okay.

ED: And we bought the homestead here I think in, around '93.

DP: Okay, okay.

ED: '88 I had started a flooring store in Assiniboia.

DP: Okay.

ED: And after 22 years, we just sold it here two years ago.

DP: Okay. So you did come back, kind of like Randy [Gaudry], you did come back a little bit later in life?

ED: Yeah, oh yeah.

DP: So what drew you back home, just to be home again or?

ED: Yeah, it was always home.

DP: Yeah, it's like when you go and you come back and you see those hills right away and you know you're home. Well, I'm from Rockglen I can understand that. I tell people that Rockglen and Willow Bunch are the two prettiest towns down there.

ED: Yeah, yeah.

DP: I could fully understand that. Okay, well I will conclude the interview so I thank you Emile.

ED: You're welcome, wish I could be more help.

DP: You're a great help. And I'm just going to do a couple house keeping things with you, and I'll let you get on with your day. Some once again thank you ever so much.

...

DP: Well I learned a lot today so I thank you for that Emile and you have a good day and I'll let you get on with your day.

ED: Yeah same to you.

DP: Thank you. Bye, bye.