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SASKATCHEWAN
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ST. LAURENT
SASKATCHEWAN
TRIBE/NATION: METIS
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INTERPRETER:
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Born 1884 in St. Laurent and raised there.
- Had some schooling then worked as farmer. Still owns 465 acres of land.
- Why the Metis came to Saskatchewan from Winnipeg.
- Causes of the Riel Rebellion of 1885.
- Memories of Gabriel Dumont.
- Present day treatment of Metis people.

Carol: You were born in St. Laurent in 1884. And what did your parents do there?

Antoine: (Translated) There was nothing else to do, they were farmers.

Carol: How much land did they have?

Antoine: (Translated) One river lot they had at the beginning. In those days widows were allowed to homestead also. My mother got another river lot, the next river lot, when Dad died.

Carol: Were they both Metis?

Antoine: My mother was a Recette. I don't think my father was Metis. My mother was; she must have had some Indian blood somewhere.

Carol: Where were they born?

Antoine: In Winnipeg. You know, all those people down there in Winnipeg, they were very poor, you know. I don't think that they had any horses. They used to travel just on foot, you know. (Translated) And they came here because all of the people that lived along the Red River in Winnipeg were very, very poor. I remember my uncle saying that it is a darn good thing that the Red River had a lot of fish otherwise they wouldn't have had enough to live. There were a lot of travellers in those days. They used to be going back and forth from Winnipeg to Saskatchewan. It was sort of the habit that the people were looking for something. (English) And besides, they had some trouble with the government. You, what we call them, halfbreed, but there were some, lots of pure Canadians down there too. In Winnipeg, but going under that name, halfbreed, you know. And they had some trouble with the government down there. (Translated) The government wanted to give the land that the Metis were on to the Scottish people. Also, the floods caused a great deal of the people to decide to leave Winnipeg to come to Saskatchewan. There were two reasons. The flood was so bad that the houses were carried away by the currents. A great deal of the people lost everything in the flood so they decided to move here and they settled from Fish Lake down, up to St. Louis by the river. The reason that they all settled by a river was because there was no lumber to make wells and things so they had to get their water from the river. They couldn't settle any old place.

Carol: Do you know where your father's parents are from?

Antoine: He came to work for the Hudson's Bay in Winnipeg. My grandfather was born in Winnipeg. My grand-grandfather was from Scotland, you know.

Carol: What about your mother's parents?

Antoine: That's the confusing part! My grandmother was a Boyer, but my grandfather by the side of my mother... It was the habit of the Indian people to give nicknames. And my grandfather, I don't even know his real name. I know his last name but I know his nickname. On the side of my father, I know his name. My grandfather was William John Ferguson, that is what his name was.

Carol: That is your father's father though.

Antoine: Yeah. But on my mother's side, it was different. Well, at that time, they had a little Indian pony. They couldn't farm there, just a few acres. But they had some cattle, you know, and within time there were some horses, of course. I don't know if those, there was an old machine - if

there is some there - some in the museums, I don't know. I didn't see them. They call that the Reaper. This machine just cut the grain and they had to tie them by hand.

Carol: This was on your parents' farm?

Antoine: Yes, on my parents'. But I don't remember about my grandparents. Oh, my grandparents, I think they just used a sickle or scythe.

Carol: Did you go to school?

Antoine: Yes, I went to school.

Carol: In St. Laurent?

Antoine: Yeah.

Carol: How many years?

Antoine: Oh, well, I don't know. I know that I went up to grade two I think. We start with French, you know. And then the government stopped them teaching French, they had to teach only English. And then we had to start in English. What would we know? Nothing. We couldn't - yes or no, that is all that we knew in English. (laughs) (Translated) When I went to school the teachers were brothers. That means something like sisters - religious community. And they were living at the mission and they'd teach school. But those were the fellows that taught

French. And then we had a fellow from Quebec who could speak English that taught English.

Carol: But no French?

Antoine: No French. After the government passed this law, they had to teach only English. I did go to school in French, but after, I had to go in English.

Well, those settlers, they couldn't pay tax, you know. They were just poor enough, they couldn't have any money to pay those taxes for to have a teacher. I went to about grade two in French and then I had to start over and went to about grade two in English. After that they closed down the school. They couldn't pay the taxes.

Carol: The people couldn't pay the taxes so they shut down the school?

Antoine: (Translated) That was their excuse anyway.

Carol: Do you think that was right?

Antoine: Of course not.

Carol: They should have left it open anyway?

Antoine: But they couldn't pay - grant, I suppose - I don't know about that. If they had any grant from the government for the teachers. I don't know. I don't remember.

Carol: Do you think the government should have given them a grant if there was no money in St. Laurent?

Antoine: I don't know. Yes, maybe, but do something good too. But at that time though, the instruction, it was no good. But there was no job for those people. I went only three, on grade two, you know. And my brother Bill, he is dead now, he died about the age of 88. And he was pretty good at school there. And the teacher we had there, they went about three or four, they went about grade four or five, I think. They didn't bother with those little kids, you know. You understand what I mean? My brother Bill, he educated himself. He was pretty good. He was the secretary here at Duck Lake, you know. You understand? And all those people, they were grade four or five, even my brother, they didn't do as much as I do. I had no education. But I bought three-quarter of land when I wanted to farm there. I don't think that education in those days was that important. They didn't know what the school go out for. (laughs).

Translator: I asked him if the people got angry or started complaining when they shut down the school. He said, "No, not at all. They didn't even know what education was for."

Carol: When did you leave St. Laurent?

Antoine: Never. (laughs)

Carol: Well, you are in Duck Lake now.

Antoine: I got my land there. I got 460 acres down there in St. Laurent yet.

Carol: Oh, you still live there?

Antoine: Part of the time, yes. But in wintertime, bad weather here, you know.

Carol: Oh, I see, you have two houses?

Antoine: Yeah.

Translator: This isn't his house, he stays with this lady. She teaches.

Carol: Oh, I see.

Antoine: Oh no, it's not my house. She's the boss there. That's what she say, anyway, she's the boss.

Translator: He has got his house in St. Laurent yet.

Carol: So you have lived in St. Laurent?

Antoine: (Translated) Yeah, my whole life was in St. Laurent. Well, I was never lazy, you know. I worked hard, of course. But, I'll tell you, money never bothered me. I was always a good worker but even if I didn't have much, it didn't bother me. I just worked for whatever the task.

Translator: I asked him if he ever felt like leaving St. Laurent. And he said no, he always had a good life there. And he said everybody's born with special talent, and his was to be a farmer, so he was happy being a farmer.

Carol: And how much land do you have there?

Antoine: Right now, I've got about 465 acres, I think.

Carol: About two quarters?

Antoine: Yeah, three quarters. I bought my neighbor's, you know.

Carol: Three quarters? Three quarter sections?

Antoine: It's river lots down there, you know.

Carol: Three river lots?

Antoine: Yeah.

Carol: Did you buy the river lots?

Antoine: Of course I had to buy them.

Carol: All three? None of them were your father's?

Antoine: No, I was fifteen years old. I had only a shirt and... (laughs).

Translator: And that is all? The rest you bought yourself?

Antoine: Yeah. I didn't get any from my parents.

Carol: When you were a boy, did you hear lots of people talk about the Rebellion?

Antoine: They didn't talk much about that.

Translator: I asked him if they talked about the Rebellion and he said no, that they didn't talk much about it. And I said, "Well, how come? Wasn't it interesting?" And he said no, that it wasn't interesting. He said they just had fought and that was it. And he said they used to have a few meetings but he said his parents didn't bother with that.

Oh, I forgot. He said there was no education in those days. And therefore you couldn't read about it. Only if you

could read like Riel; and he said Gabriel Dumont could not read.

Carol: Could not read? Could he write?

Antoine: No, he was not educated, that Dumont.

Carol: He couldn't read or write?

Antoine: No, no. He couldn't sign his name.

Carol: How do you know that?

Antoine: Well, there was Gabriel Dumont, Edward Dumont, Elie Dumont, Joseph Dumont. Joseph Dumont was the youngest of those boys down there. And they went to school at St. Laurent here. You know? Him, he could read a little bit, you know. But all those whole people down there, his brother-in-law, his three brothers, they have never went to school.

Translator: Oh, I said if he didn't write, then wouldn't he learn it on his own and he said he didn't.

Antoine: I'll tell you something, but he could read Cree.

Carol: But not French?

Antoine: Not French, not English, nothing at all. My uncle Ferguson, he said when he started to learn - learn to write Cree in two weeks. He said, "I learned that in two weeks." Well, how a person can write Cree and read Cree in two weeks I don't understand that. It must be pretty easy.

Carol: Oh yeah, because it was symbols. Did people talk much about Gabriel Dumont or did you know him?

Antoine: I talked to him! I remember I talked to him. I was young that time, you know, but I talked to him.

Carol: What kind of person was he?

Antoine: (Translated) He was a man who never bragged about what he had done. The other used to talk about him. Brag. I mean, they used to talk that he had been a great guy. They used to say that he was a man who was too stupid to know fear.

Carol: What else did they say about him?

Antoine: (Translated) Gabriel never talked much. He never bragged about what he had done. He kept everything to himself, so...

Carol: Did people like him?

Antoine: Everybody liked him. He looked for peace. I will tell you something. It was last winter, there was a guy from Prince Albert here and by the store, he said that everybody at that time, all those Frenchmen, he said, he was a bad man

because he was, because he'd... He asked me what kind of man he was, if he was a murderer, you know. I said, "No, he was not."

(Translated) I hear one foggy morning Gabriel Dumont left his place. Gabriel always got up early and either went hunting or something. But this time he was going looking for horses. And all at once, in the fog, he could hear howling, something like a wolf. In those days there were wolves. But Gabriel realized that it wasn't a wolf howling, that it was an Indian. It was the habit of the Indians in those days; this was signals to each other. They could understand what they were saying, but the white and the Metis couldn't understand the Indians, what they were trying to say.

It was foggy, so he crept around, and came - all at once realized where the Indian was. He saw him on the hill, and he could have attacked him, but instead he came from behind and realized that this Indian had left his knife beside him. He was hollering and he was using his hands, or whatever, to do this hollering. And Gabriel could have killed him, because the Indians, that was their main weapon, their knife. Everyone had a knife.

But what Gabriel did, he took the knife and threw it away, and then he grabbed the Indian. And the Indian really got scared, because he was positive that Gabriel would kill him on account of that was what he would have done. But Gabriel told him, "No," he said, "it is not our style or mine to kill unless we have to." He said, "We don't kill for nothing." So he let the Indian go.

And he said, "But when you get back," Gabriel told this to the Indian, "you tell the other Indians, 'I met a man who had every chance to kill me but let me go.'" And the Indian said, "Nobody will believe me if I tell them that." So Gabriel said, "To prove that it really happened, let's change coats. You just take my coat and then you say that this man did that." So the Indian said, "No! They might shoot me if they see me, you know, with another coat coming in." He said, "No, they'll realize that if you're alone, that they'll recognize you before they kill, uh?"

So this is what they did. They changed jackets. And he said, "By the jacket then, they will believe you that it's really true that I had a chance to kill you but didn't."

Carol: Where did you hear that story?

Antoine: (Begins answering in French, but end of tape cuts him short. Source not known. The translator asks the subject if Gabriel Dumont told him this story. His answer began, "No," and then it was cut short.)

(End of Side A)

(Side B)

Antoine: An old man died just a little while ago who was a hundred years old, a Mr. Fleury. And this Mr. Fleury and Gabriel married two sisters, and from what I know, Gabriel Dumont's wife is certainly no Scotchman by the looks of her. She was very much an English halfbreed.

Carol: Could you repeat what you said before, what we missed about Gabriel Dumont being religious?

Antoine: (Translated) Gabriel was not a religious man, not really. He was a person that didn't believe in anything. Not that he talked against religion or God or anything, but that he just more or less minded his own business. He was married to Madeleine Wilkie. They didn't have any children, but there were stories (and this part, I don't know if it is completely true) that he did have a son with another woman. But he was a man like other men, therefore this was possible. After a while, they didn't talk about this anymore. The people I knew very well did not talk about it. He used to read Cree, you know.

Carol: Did Gabriel read the Bible?

Antoine: (Translated) His brother used to read the Bible so he maybe did too. I don't know. Because they read the Bible, they didn't believe everything the priest said and that is probably the reason that some thought Gabriel was not religious. Maybe it was because he read the Bible and didn't go according to what he was told by the priest. Maybe he might have been. He didn't talk against the priests when the priests were trying to make him believe things.

Translator: I asked him what he talked about when he talked to Gabriel Dumont.

Antoine: (Translated) I don't really remember that much, but I do remember when Gabriel first came back from France I went to the church in Batoche. And when I came out, Gabriel was sitting on the steps of the church talking to all the people. And I noticed that Gabriel had three medals on him. The first medal was for being the best shooter in France. And the other two medals, Gabriel probably said what they were for, but I was too young to be very much concerned about why he had them or what they really meant. They were looking for those. Bill, the son of his brother...

Translator: Oh my gosh!

Antoine: (Translated) They had been looking for those medals, but Joe Lamont which is really Joe Dumont, the son of Gabriel's brother, went and sold them to someone in Prince Albert and they've never been able to find out who. I think they sold them for around ten dollars.

Carol: Why did the Metis fight in the Rebellion?

Antoine: I don't know exactly, but - how'd it start? Well, those what we call the halfbreeds, they were down there, they got no survey there, you know. They just stepped up the same style that they had in Winnipeg down there. They had those river lots, every ten chains wide. They wanted that way to help each other, you know. To be close neighbors, you understand? When they came here around the river, they wanted the same lot, but they wanted their land to be surveyed. The government didn't come and survey, didn't bother. Well, they thought they were against them again, you know. That's why they sent for Riel. To try to fix things up. It started near here, Duck Lake, a few miles back. An Indian met the - there were a group of them. An Indian was there too, met the police. And one of the police had a gun, and McKay, an Indian, went to get the gun from the police. The leader of the police, I guess, said, "Shoot!" So the policeman that had the - was trying to get the - I mean, was getting his gun taken away from him - shot the Indian. And there were a few more who got killed right there. So then the Metis said, "They started it. We've got to defend ourselves."

Carol: So you think they were right to defend themselves?

Antoine: By the way now, the white people, they are talking, they had all the right.

Carol: The Metis?

Antoine: (Translated) Yeah. From the way I think about it, now, I think they were fighting for a cause and it was all right that they did.

Carol: Why were the police troops coming? There must have been some reason.

Antoine: (Translated) Yeah, there must have been but I really didn't hear why the police were around here. They always came in troops but they didn't know why they were coming in.

Carol: Do you remember seeing any of the policemen or the soldiers?

Antoine: (Translated) No, not as soldiers but some had remained behind and taken up land here, like St. Denis, I remember. Not that many stayed but there wasn't too much to do. These guys that stayed behind, the only way they could make a go of it was to take away from the Metis people. But...

Carol: Do you know how many Metis people were killed in the Rebellion?

Antoine: I haven't got an idea.

Translator: But on the Batoche monument, how many are named there?

Antoine: I guess all the names are there.

Carol: Did the soldiers that remained behind, were they well thought of by the Metis?

Antoine: (Translated) Oh, they all got along after.

Carol: What about Riel? What did the people think about Riel then?

Antoine: (Translated) I never heard that anybody talked against him (Riel). Because after all, the majority had sent for him and wanted him to come down to help them. Because he had been a member of government or something like that, and he was educated to their way of thinking, you know. And he was here to help them.

Carol: What did the people say about the war?

Antoine: (Translated) Well, it only lasted three days and they had to stop because there was no more food. The Metis ran out of food, ran out of ammunition. (laughs)

Translator: I guess they ran out of people.

Antoine: They had to stop.

Carol: Do you think the Metis people today are treated fairly by whites and the government and so on?

Antoine: (Translated) Yes, yes. To me, I am ninety years old now, and I've never... cannot say anything against the government, for example. I've made a good life but I've worked hard for it.

Carol: Do the white look down upon the Metis as not being good as the white?

Antoine: (Translated) Before, but not now.

Carol: What about the RCMP, do they treat you fairly?

Antoine: (Translated) I don't see a difference. I think they treat them the same. For example, why is it now that so many who did not before want to say they were Metis, right now admit that they have Indian blood in them? It must mean that they figure that they're being well-treated. Or else they would not admit this.

Carol: What about the school teachers? Do they treat the kids the same?

Antoine: (Translated) Before it seemed there was a difference. The Metis were quite ignorant. For example, nowadays, if you want a real good clerk at the store, they'll hire a Metis person, because they talk to anybody. The white people just don't have that type of personality. Maybe, for

example, Duck Lake, the white people have lived here too long, that they just...

Carol: Do they look down on the Metis?

Antoine: (Translated) Well, nowadays, most of the Metis people are on welfare, so they're well enough to do. So the people don't look down upon them, because they've got money all the time.

Carol: But you said at the store, if they wanted to hire somebody who would talk to everybody, they would hire a Metis.

Antoine: (Translated) But the whites just don't have that kind of personality.

Carol: So they don't talk to everybody then - the whites?

Antoine: (Translated) A priest came here. He talked here for an hour and a half, and he said, "Oh my gosh! You're the man I've been looking for," because I talked so easily. But when the priest first came in, he - not insulted me - but he sort of wanted to teach me a lesson or something.

Carol: Are the priests like that?

Antoine: (Translated) Oh yeah, the priests used to be that way, that they tried to make the halfbreed, or the Metis, believe anything. But now the priests get shut up by the people. They don't get away with all this stuff.

Carol: But do they treat the white people better, the priests?

Antoine: (Translated) The priest came in here and he kind of got me because he wanted me to sing some old time songs, and I said, "Well, why should I sing some, I don't..." And the priest said, "Well, sing like a Metis would sing." I didn't like this. It made me feel that the priest thought the Metis people were kind of dumb.

Carol: Did the priest think differently of the Metis?

Antoine: (Translated) Well, naturally, they're like everybody else - if you're rich, they'll think quite a bit of you, but if you're poor, well... No matter if you're the biggest stealer in the world, I mean, if you're rich, even if you're a big stealer, they don't look down upon you, but if you're poor, they will. I found out after I talked to him for a while, he was surprised that I was as smart as I was. So he said, "In your young days were there other people like you?" Probably he thought that I was an exception because I was smart - a smart halfbreed. (laughs)

Carol: What about the people at social welfare - do they treat the Metis worse than the whites?

Antoine: (Translated) To me, welfare is nothing but a thing that spoiled people. But to my way of thinking, if you fill your forms, you'll be treated the same way no matter what you are.

Translator: I asked him what he thought of being a halfbreed. He said that he...

Antoine: I don't know if I have any Indian blood, I don't know.

Translator: Well, if you are a Metis, you must be!

Antoine: (Translated) I never was ashamed to admit I was a Metis. People did not believe I was a Metis when I said, because of my looks. It seems to me that the more you look like an Indian, the less ready you are to admit that you are halfbreed. If you don't look like a halfbreed, you'll admit that you're one.

Carol: Are the white people around here richer?

Antoine: Yes.

Carol: Why?

Antoine: Why? Yeah, the people in Duck Lake here, the white people are richer and you know something? I saw people, the white people, eating nothing but bread so they could save money. Halfbreeds are not like that.

Carol: Do the whites treat the Indians worse?

Antoine: Not storekeepers. (laughs)

Carol: But what about the others?

Antoine: (Translated) That would make a difference. They would not have Indian friends. I don't have any white friends. I don't have that many friends. Some have invited me to go, but I did not go.

Carol: Okay.

Translator: Merci beaucoup!

(End of Side B)

(End of Interview)

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