

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 2, Laliberte Sessions (A)

Start Clip: 00:57:00

Heather Devine: For example, Joseph Cardinal and Joseph Desjarlais; they're two Canadian Freeman who are basically the patriarchs of the Métis population in northeastern Alberta. They're a case in point. Joseph Cardinal and several other members of the Cardinal family were members of a Montreal based family of outfitters, and their commercial activities in the fur trade date back to the 1680s. And some branches of this family end up in Detroit and in the French settlements of Louisiana (French regime Louisiana when I'm using the term). And Joseph and his relatives, Jacque, Jeremy, and Joaquin, were among the earliest Canadian engagés identified in the Athabasca fur trade of the 1780s. And they were all over the place. You'll find them from the lakes of northern Manitoba right up to the foothills of the Rockies. And they intermarried with Native women early on, and you will find that there are Cardinals who were the patriarchs in what are now reserve communities. There are lots of Cardinals in Métis communities, and they're all through the United States as well.

The Desjarlais. Joseph Desjarlais enters the fur trade as an independent trader in 1785 and he gets financial backing from a fellow named Luc Delacorne **[sp?]**, who is an influential military officer, a merchant, a diplomat. And although the Desjarlais were primarily an agricultural family, they had really strong military connections. They had connections to the principal military families involved in the fur trade since the beginning of the French regime. The family patriarch of that family, Jean Jacques Desjarlais, was a soldier in the Carignan-Salières regiment, which was brought over in 1665 to defeat the Iroquois. And Desjarlais' daughters married veterans from those regimental companies. And later on, when these men participate in the French regime fur trade, and their sons participate in

the fur trade, they hire their cousins as engagés, and this was very, very common. You'd go back and hire your cousin to man the boats if you were in the position to hire people.

Now, Joseph Desjarlais was one of only a handful of French Canadiens who get a trading pass the year he goes into the interior. The rest of them were Scots. And why was he able to establish himself permanently there? You have to understand during this period it was pretty hairy. Rival companies would lie in wait and beat people up as they were crossing portages. It was pretty cutthroat. This was the time Peter Pond was operating in Athabasca, and he was a bit of a psycho. I mean he made life miserable for a lot of people. So how does Joseph Desjarlais manage to survive? Well, what happens is he has a friend, Toussaint Lesieur, who is Peter Pond's clerk at Lac la Ronge, and he's also a tough guy. However, he is a tough guy who is related to Joseph Desjarlais, which probably helps Joseph because it means that he's allowed to operate in that area and he probably gets a little help from his relative. His brother and Joseph Desjarlais' brother, Antoine, comes in later. He engages with another company. Finally, a third relative, François, comes out in 1792 with McTavish Frobisher, and later on all three of these men are living as Freemen. They do their three year thing and then they're out of there.

Now, Joseph Cardinal's daughter, Josephte, has fourteen children—four by her first husband, who is the Canadien engagé turned Freeman, Joseph Ladouceur, ten by her second country husband, Joseph Desjarlais, Jr., the son of Joseph Desjarlais (that man I told you about from Quebec who gets a servant's contract). Now, other children from these families intermarry with the Decoignes **[sp?]**, François Decoigne's **[sp?]** family who's a Northwest Company clerk descended from the Decoigne **[sp?]** trading family, another trader who comes from these families. These children, in turn, intermarry with other people in the area around Lac la Biche, Alberta. They begin a tradition of intermarriage that is so pronounced that by 1880 most of the 300 Métis people who make up the population of Lac la Biche, Alberta can trace their ancestry back to Joseph Cardinal and Joseph

Desjarlais. And this kind of thing is going on throughout the West. For example, in the Red River region of Manitoba, there are other Canadian independents who have established themselves. Charles Racette—Canadian Freeman in the Red River area had established trade and kin relations with the Saulteaux as early as 1780. Racette himself was descended from a family involved in the government fur trade at Tadoussac during the French regime. Antoine Pelletier dit Assiniboine, who is a really one of the first XY people and Freeman at Pembina, is descended from the Pelletier dit Antaya family, which was very active in the Iroquois fur trade right from the French regime.

Now you have to say to yourself, "Why are these people getting involved in the fur trade? Why are they working for companies like McTavish Frobisher? They're French, they're never going to get ahead." Well, the point is, the French Canadian fur traders never saw British dominance as being a permanent condition. They always thought that eventually they would get the upper hand. First of all, at the same time that the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company were operating, prior to 1821, there was a very strong St. Louis based fur trade network, and it was run by French people. And those French people—Canadiens, Creoles whatever you want to call them—had family connections in Montreal, and in fact they had cousins who were down operating out of St. Louis, Missouri. If you look at the list, the servants list, from the English River book that Harry Duckworth pulled together, Harry mentions a few names that he can't find in the Quebec records. Well, I'll tell you why. Because they're St. Louis records. Those are St. Louis people, they're coming up. And Peter Pond was down in St. Louis, too. We really are just beginning to scratch the surface to understand how these people operated, and they covered huge geographical areas.

The other thing about the Canadiens, they had an affinity for wintering. The British never particularly cared for it. They didn't like living out in tents in the winter away from the post. Unfortunately, if you want to develop kin relations with Native groups, if you want to learn about how to trade furs, if you want to learn the wilderness bush skills that you need, you've got to go out there and live. And you've got to live for a sustained

period of time. What eventually happened is that the fur trade prior to 1821 was being run on the ground by engagés and Freeman who could speak Aboriginal languages, had the kin connections, and basically their British boss is kind of waiting and wringing his hands and hoping that everything will work out. And the other thing that happens as a result of this is these men who have established these family relationships, who have done the lengthy, what we might call bride service, to get involved with an Aboriginal community, they're staying with their children. And in some literature you'll find these men referred to in a very negative fashion, and that's because of who's writing the accounts of these men. The fact is, quite often you'll find Freeman referred to in very negative ways by British writers, and it's because the people who are writing these accounts couldn't control them. The Freeman were very powerful within their own milieu. They did what they wanted, they did as they saw fit. And, in fact, after 1821, when Sir George Simpson realizes he's got to get a handle on these people, he does it the crude inelegant way: by threatening to send them back to Quebec and cutting off their ammunition. That's how he does it. That's how he basically gets those people in line. It's the only leverage he has, is his monopoly, because he can't do it any other way.

End Clip: 01:06:44