

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 2

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Norman Fleury: But the other one that I was going to talk about to you today, and I was asked to talk about, was my identity. And there was no such thing as an identity problem when I grew up in St. Lazare. We were Métis, we knew who we were. We lived the Métis life, we lived the Michif way of life. And there was no questions asked because you had your social life in the Michif gatherings, you had your dances, you had your songs, you had your humour, which during hard times, which, the Michif people never spoke of hard times when I was a child. There was no such thing because they were survivors, they were spoke of hard times. They never said, "When, when I starved and when I was hungry." There was no such a thing because we always had food. We lived off the land. My mother was a widower and she raised nine of us kids off the land. On subsistence farming, we milked cows, we, we, she canned, she picked wild berries. And we went and dug Seneca root, we stoked for farmers, we dug dens, coyotes, and bounty on the pups. We had fish, we had in the river, we ate catfish, jackfish, we ate any kind of fish that was there, we ate it. Rabbit, we had deer meat. We were survivors and we had, we butcher a hog in the fall. That was your supply of meat. We had big gardens.

Like that was the lifestyle of the Métis people in those days, and in your gatherings you always had good times, and we were taught things. Like, like my grandmother's sister was very talented, and she was the one that did beadwork. As a matter of fact, there was, my uncle was telling me that this guy's dog used to come to their place. Beautiful dog, a lab dog it must have been. And the dog was a real nuisance. So he did away with the dog and his mother made him beautiful mitts. So the neighbour says, "My

those are beautiful mitts." But he never told him that was his dog, you know. So, and those were the kinds of things and they were survivors.

And this lady would, back home would gather a quota, quota of cats, different cats, and she'd ask for cats, and they was wondering how in the hell, why does Lagay Shanshaw [sp?] like cats so much? So first thing you know, she's selling robes, cutter robes, very colourful. So, so those are the kinds of things that our people did for survival. And my mother, I actually seen her do this, and so there's always a reason, a purpose for everything. And, and watch your cats. But Lagay Shanshaw [sp?] died at a 108 years old, so God bless her soul, and she's with us here today. She's probably giggling, too, and laughing 'cause she liked to laugh.

And midnight mass was also very important. Like we were very spiritually, we were very, very, very spiritual, and that's what kept us alive, was the spirituality. And we'd all go to mass and with horses when I was a kid. But New Year's was the most important part of our life, because my grandparents, at six o'clock in the morning, they were kneeling down right in front of the crucifix, and then they kissed and hugged and said, "We're starting a new year, it's time for forgiving, it's time for renewal." And when my mother and uncle and aunties came, they'd kneel in front of their dad, he gave them the blessing, and they started off a new life. And the table was set all day, and you ate all day, and even if you were a glutton you weren't called that, but it was the time to eat and to celebrate. And they told us different stories, like at Easter time—people really don't know this, not many people know this—but when I was a young boy, my uncle said, "You, early in the early morning as the sun comes, you look at the sun, but you put a black cloth over your, your eyes and you'll see the sun dance." And we did that and you could see that sun dance, it was like celebration of the resurrection of Christ. And it does happen, if you use a black cloth, and maybe that's where the expression of the sun dance or sun dancing, but we had, that was our sun dance. This is what happened.

And they told us stories of ghost stories and the Rougarou stories. The Rougarou and they also told us stories about Nanabush, Wesakejack, Chi-

Jean. And those were stories that were real life stories of the creation of the world, and we learned those things through these stories. And the games. We used to get together and we'd play la barouche and we'd play euchre and bull moose and rummy and crib and whist and la Kochee [?] and la bataille and all those different games that we played, and that was our winter socializing.

And another thing, too, we were also seasonal people. We lived with the seasons. Like, now, you'd a-been gardening, and you getting ready like squirrels for the winter. And then when fall came, it was time to hunt. I remember my grandmother putting out saskatoons on a canvas and drying them out, and then wintertime, she'd take a few, puff them up in water, and we'd have some nice saskatoon pie in wintertime, fresh. Those are the kinds of things we did. My grandfather had these cellars that we used specifically to keep your food and preserve it. We did those kinds of things. We also were good hunters. And we knew when to hunt. We were conservationists, we were scientists, we were botanists. When my grandmother, we used to go and pick medicine, we gave thanks; we put tobacco or we prayed. We did all those kinds of things. We gave thanks. Everything we did is, we gave thanks.

So the lifestyle was very influential from our grandparents. There was no drugs, alcohol, or all that stuff in our lives. And the pride and the self-esteem was there. So with that I think I'm running out of time, but I would like to thank you all for your time, and I know we could go on for a long time—especially I could. I'm not only longevity in my family, but long-winded. So thank you.

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