

Road Allowance Interview, Mervin Pelletier

Conducted by Scott Duffee
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SD: Could you please tell me your name and your home community?

MP: My name is Mervin Pelletier. I live near Yorkton, Saskatchewan.

SD: What community did you grow up in?

MP: I was raised in Crescent Lake. That's 12 miles south of Yorkton.

SD: Was Crescent Lake a road allowance community?

MP: Well, they never called it that. I never heard it being called that by my people. But I guess there were some people who came down a few years back, and there were a couple of Road Allowances that went like this and they were in the middle there. Most of them didn't live on the Road Allowance. Yeah, I guess you can call it that.

SD: Who were your parents and your grandparents?

MP: My dad was Joe Pelletier. He was born in the States. He came from the States, and my mother was name Isabelle Flamont. They were married here when my mother was 18 years old, and there was 14 children in the family.

SD: Did they always live in Crescent Lake?

MP: Before we moved to Crescent Lake, I was born in Saltcoats, Saskatchewan, and we lived by Bredenbury. Just on the outskirts of Bredenbury, that's when we lived on the Road Allowance. I was seven years old when we moved to Crescent Lake. I was born in 1944. I spent a few years in Crescent Lake. I moved out of Crescent Lake when I was 21 years old. I was on my own then.

SD: So in Saltcoats, were there other Métis families living there?

MP: No, we used to go and camp there because they had a sports day there. We took a tent there and went to camp in the road allowance and attended the sports days. We'd stay there for a month digging Seneca roots and stuff like that.

SD: Just your family that did that?

MP: Well, there were other families who were scattered in different road allowances and, and I was born right in the tent there.

SD: On the outskirts of Bredenbury, were there other Métis families there?

MP: My grandparents where there. My mother's dad was Louis Flamont and her mom was named Sarah Flamont. I don't remember my grandpa on my daddy's side. He passed away years ago, but my grandma was Helen. She used to be a Houle and was she and married to a Pelletier. She was from the States as well. I think I was 18 years old when she passed on. She was over 90 years old when she passed on. That was quite a few years ago.

SD: Can you remember the names of any other Métis families that lived in Saltcoats or Bredenbury?

MP: No, just my grandparents were living there. There was another family there, the Grumbos. I am not sure if they were Métis. Then a few years later, I heard they had their treaty rights, but they were always considered Métis. We considered them Métis because they were around us all the time. We were the only three families who were living there at the time. We all moved to Crescent Lake at the same time with wagons and horses.

SD: What other Métis families lived in Crescent Lake?

MP: There were about 21 families at least.

SD: Can you remember some of their last names?

MP: There were Allarys, Pelletiers, Flamonts, Langans, Lafontaines, and Martineaus. They were another family that I don't know if they were actually Métis or not, but they considered themselves as Métis, and to this day, they still say that they are Métis. Somehow, my mom and the Martineau boy's mom were related. I don't know how close it was, but anyway we were called each other cousins because I respect my elders.

SD: Did any non-Métis live in Crescent Lake? Any white folks any First Nation folks?

MP: No, just the teachers living in the school house. They were the only white people. Otherwise, the community was made up of Métis people.

SD: Did anyone in Crescent Lake own their property?

MP: They didn't own the property. That was all leased before I was born. I don't know how they went about it. How do you go about leasing land? They leased that land for apparently 99 years at that time. Today, you go ask any archives about this. I did that. There are no records. They've been lost, and there is a reason for that. I have my own reason anyway. They were lost: they were burned in a fire or something like that.

SD: Something strange happened with that lease?

MP: That's right, yes. There is still one family living there right now by the name of a Brazeau. His name is Roy Brazeau. His mom is still alive, but his dad has passed on. His dad used to live there, and they had parted, and his dad kept on living there. They are the only family that never left there after they moved.

SD: How did your family and other Métis families make a living in Crescent Lake?

MP: Working for farmers, and trapping. That was our lifestyle. My dad used to trap all winter. He was a good trapper, and he one of the best shots there was. We made a living with that and cutting cord wood in the wintertime as well. We always had horses. Summertime and in the spring, we would hook up the horses take a couple of tents along. Everybody jumped into the wagon working for farmers all summer, fixing fence, picking stones and roots, and in the fall, stoking, thrashing, whatever. A lot of times, we got paid in chickens, pork and stuff like that. We made a good living. We got along well.

SD: You said picking roots was one of the—?

MP: Roots from trees. We used to cut scrub brush with axes. I remember I used to pile so many branches. We made a living digging Seneca roots, and anything we could do, we did it. At that time, things were not that expensive. They were fairly cheap, unlike today. If you had a hundred dollars that time, you could get groceries for a couple of months. That's how we made a living. We made a good living.

SD: So, with the trapping, were you ever hassled by game warden?

MP: No, no.

SD: What about any other kind of hunting were you ever?

MP: Never, no.

SD: The game wardens left you guys alone?

MP: Yeah, we were never hassled by a game warden. There was one game warden that the people kind of knew. I think his last name was a Manfred. I am not sure. Anyway, the people used to work for farmers a lot. We got along so

well. The farmers needed the Métis, especially for stoking in the fall. When they started thrashing in the fall, they needed help. So of course, we were allowed to go hunting all we wanted. And it was private land, and there was nothing wrong with that. Yeah, we lived off the land quite a bit.

SD: And that game warden's name was Manfred?

MP: I think it was, if I am not mistaken. I am not quite sure. I was fairly young when that happened. When I was about ten years old, I used to go out with my dad. That's when I learned how to trap, weasels, mink, muskrats, anything.

SD: So, with the hunting and the trapping, what resources did your family harvest? What kind of plants?

MP: Well in the summertime, we picked a lot of berries, Saskatoons, chokecherries, pin cherries, and mom used to can them and make jam out of them. In fall, dad used to shoot a lot of ducks and mom used to can those also. They're just like chicken when they are canned. She'd put some salt in there. These people knew how to do things, and we had deer, grouse, and rabbits. That's how I grew up with that kind of stuff. Today, I am still into that because I love it, and I am a happy to have it. Anything that was edible, raspberries, strawberries, we picked a lot of stuff, and we always had a garden. Dad would race home with the horses once and awhile, and would come and check the garden, and we'd go back again. He was working out there.

SD: Did you guys ever leave home as a family to go camp out somewhere, like on a farmer's land to work for a farmer, or did just the men go?

MP: The whole family went. First of all, the grown ups went and the younger ones stayed back until they got out of school. Then we all went. Yeah, we helped. We worked hard. We had to share.

SD: So, the whole family would go work somewhere and would come back and check the garden?

MP: Yeah, that's right. It didn't take us long to clean our little garden and then we were gone again.

SD: Where and when were your resources collected? Where did you go hunting and did you only hunt certain things at certain times a year?

MP: Well, for trapping, you can do it all winter and we started in the fall as soon it froze up, and the same thing with animals and bush birds. In the summertime, we'd hunt the rabbits, partridges and deer, and whatever

SD: Whereabouts did you do this hunting?

MP: Just all over Crescent Lake. We used to go as far as 15-20 miles with horses when we worked for the farmers. And at that time, there was more bush than there is today. There was a lot of bush. It was free. The farmers and the Métis got along perfectly. That's what helped so much. "You go right ahead and kill yourself a deer, and you don't worry about anything. Nobody will bother you." That's how it was. We dried a lot of meat, but we didn't do much fishing. There was no place to fish actually.

SD: So, was it mostly deer that you made dried meet with?

MP: Yeah, we had no elk around here at that time, no moose, and no bears. You would see the odd timber wolf maybe. That's about it. Now we got them all over the place.

SD: Did you just dry that deer meat in the sun?

MP: In the sun, plus we smoked it outside. Dad used to make a rack about that wide with wire, and he'd just hang the meat right there.

SD: Oh, and just have a little cover for it?

MP: No, just out in the open.

SD: Just to keep the bugs off, I guess.

MP: The flies were bad. We smoked it with a small flame.

SD: What sort of traditional medicines were used in your community?

MP: Anything that was available, Seneca roots, and the roots of raspberries and strawberries, for example. They were good for your stomach and for cramps. Dad used to peel red willow bark and boil it, to make a tea out of it. That was good for headaches. It's like aspirin. There are a lot of them that I can't even name. I can name them in my language, but you wouldn't know them (laugh). I could show you the picture.

SD: GDI made a book about medicines. I don't know have you ever seen that book?

MP: No, I don't think so.

SD: Can you name a few in your language?

MP: Strawberries are lii frayz, raspberries are lii fraambwayz, Saskatoons are lii pwayr, and pin cherries are lii miriiz.

SD: What about medicines are there any that you could name?

MP: Well, there's a white kind of flower, l'aarbr la denn they called it. It was good for treating fevers. And Seneca root was li raasin, for the root.

SD: And you actually used Seneca for medicine?

MP: Oh, sure Seneca root itself.

SD: How did you prepare it when you—?

MP: Well, you have to boil most of it. You never fry medicine. You boil it and it makes a tea. So, we had to do that. Medication was so very important. We also used wild turnips or li navoo as well. I don't know if you have seen wild turnips. They grow about six inches, and they are hard to dig up. They are about that long, as big as your finger. We used to boil them for medication as well. It would clear your whole body up. If you're heated or something like that, or even if have arthritis pain, it will go through your whole body if you drink that.

SD: I have to get some of that stuff.

MP: We used to eat that as well. The young stuff itself is good to eat, but the bigger they are, the dryer they are, and they are pretty hard to chew. They grew alongside the valleys and the south side. On the north side were there was no bush, they grew there. Yeah, we picked a lot of that. I do that every summer as a matter of fact. And of course, there were all kinds of flowers that dad used to pick, including thorn bush flowers. That's a cleanser. There is so much to know out there. I could sit here for weeks and tell you stuff about what I learned, but you have to have your mind and heart into it. If you're not interested, you're not going to learn anything. Today, I still got that knowledge and I am proud of it. I try to pass thus on to the younger generation. They are not interested in it, and it hurts me. They should be. That's where a lot of our medication comes from any way. Mother Nature is the best when it's raw. We don't put that into sugar, into any kind of medication, nothing like that. Oh, it tastes bitter, of course. It's hard to take a lot of it, but it's the best. It works, and it's solid. It's not diluted in any way at all. Some day, when you have time, come over, and we'll will go out

and drive. Come stay for a couple of days. I would love to show some of these. Bring your camping stuff and take pictures of it. Incidentally, I am interested in making a film of my own about trapping and hunting, a summer and a winter one. I already made plans for that, and I have a guy to come with a camera. I would just love to do that. It's me. You put me in the forest, that's my home. I feel so good. The animals don't bother me. I passed bears from here to the window. They look at me and I sit, and I don't feel afraid why? I respect them. I kill a rabbit, a partridge, I say my thanks. I'm thankful. That's my food. It's keeping me alive, and I am thankful. I never kill anything without saying thank you, and I never bothered something that I don't have to shoot. So that's why I think they respect me as well. It's a great feeling. I had been out there most of my life. Let's say all my life. I am 69-years-old today. I will be 70 in July, and I am not going to stop. No, I am not gonna stop. I see things out there you wouldn't believe. I know things out there that people wouldn't believe. That's right, things that happen. It's something that a lot of people don't see. Twice now, I caught rabbits that had little tiny rabbits about the size of your thumbnail between the skin here in the gut, just between the inside layer and the skin itself. Twice that happened to me. I don't tell everybody this, but that's okay. It's something that a lot of people won't believe. For a lot of them, I couldn't make them believers. The first time that it happened, my dad used to tell me about this because it happened to him. He said, "That's the best thing that could have ever happened to you. "Yeah," he said. "You'll be the best trapper there. You wouldn't miss a thing and same thing with your gun. You just won't miss." That's luck, hey? Twice, the first time there were two little rabbits and the second time there were four. When you are peeling a rabbit right, they just fall out. When the wife first saw that she was scared. "Oh God," she said. She didn't know what to do. I wasn't home. I was out checking my coyote snares at that time. We had a big garbage barrel outside. She went and through them in there, and she told me when I got home, she was kind of looking pale and scared. I said, "What's the matter honey?" "Something happened today, Merv," she said, "I don't like it." I said, "Why, what happened?" "Well, I was peeling this one rabbit, and these little rabbits fell out." "Where did you put them honey?" "I put them outside in the barrel there. Where am I going to put them? I got scared." I said, "Oh you shouldn't do that. That's the best thing that could have happened to us. I will show you why. I will tell you why. When I am trapping, I will pass those things through my trap." On my coyote snares, you will not miss. You will not miss a thing. It's hard to believe. People did not believe me the first time. So, the second time, I shoot quite a few people. I kept them in my wallet and that's were I keep them, they dry up. They last about two years and they just crumpled up. In one month, I made \$3500 just in coyotes alone, using those little rabbits. That's what I am saying. People don't know what is out there. A lot of people don't know what is out there at all. I felt it at that time. Of course, I didn't think about it. I should've taken pictures of these things. Today, people would have seen them. They would have had to believe in them.

SD: Well, I believe in them.

MP: It's amazing what's out there, and it doesn't happen to everybody. That's why today I tell you I am always thankful when I kill a rabbit or something. I never forget to say thanks. So, I think that's why that happened to me. My dad was

saying the same thing. He would never shoot anything unintentionally. He was going to use it, and if you want something or you hit something, you follow that thing until it's dark. If you can't see it, try as hard as you can to find it. Sometimes, you make a side shot if an animal moves and you don't hit it just right. It goes quite a way. My dad always said, "You follow that animal. I don't care how far you gotta follow it, you follow it. If it gets too dark, at least you made an effort." So that's why I respect that. That's the way I feel about it anyway.

SD: So, you really learned a lot of stuff from your dad?

MP: Well, not only from my dad, I learned a lot of stuff myself. After my dad passed away quite a few years ago, I was on my own then. I was 19-years old, and I left to go working. I was in the States for a few months. I was working in Montana a little bit, but I didn't like it. I came back home. Home is always home anyway. I was in Alberta and in Ontario working at this and that. I didn't like it. I missed my old way of living. I guess in my mind I was an old timer. So, I came home, and I stayed around then. I started hunting and trapping, and of course, working at the same time for farmers. I learned how to farm actually, drive tractors, and put in a crop. I learned all that. Yeah, I did learn a lot from my dad off the start, but I learned a lot about trapping myself. A lot of people couldn't even trap coyote with a trap. Snaring a coyote is no different then snaring a rabbit to me, but with a trap it's a different thing. A lot of people say, "Smart as a fox." Foxes are dumb little animals. They are not smart at all. Oh no, a coyote is a smart one. He can smell your breath from here to the cupboard. But I use something for that. I don't tell everybody that. I learned this myself, and I share it with somebody who really wants to make use of it though. I would do that. A lot of guys ask me here, but they don't use it the right way.

SD: Well, anything you share on here, if you decide later you don't want it published, you just scratch it out.

MP: Oh no, that's alright. People can hear it. I am not sharing my full secrets. I am not sharing my mixtures. I am not sharing that, no. I am just saying it like it is. That's what I do, and it's a big part of my life. It's a big part of my living, trapping and hunting. I can live off the land. If you throw me away some place, I'll live off the land. I don't need anything else.

SD: Where there some people in your community that were recognized as medicine people?

MP: Not too many, really. Somehow, people just seemed to be healthy. There was a little sickness going around. Dad helped people with smallpox and stuff like that, or chickenpox. We had that, and he was the only one that didn't get it in our family. The whole family had it, and he was just out hunting every day, and he went and picked medicine up. He was good for that. There was another family that never did live in Crescent Lake though. He was a good doctor anyway, Perrault that was their last name. Yeah, Alec Perreault used to be good at that, and there was another old lady that was Mrs. Langan, Pat Langan's wife. Her name was Cecilia Langan, and she was a good medicine lady as well. She even made her own salve for cuts and stuff like. That's another thing for cuts or for gangrene, I know what to do for that. That's, good stuff to know. And the barks of a lot of trees, you can make so much use of that, if you

know what to do. Like poplar, you gotta chew the bark, it tastes bad, but it's the best medicine you can get for gangrene.

SD: Did you have anyone in your family beaded moccasins?

MP: No.

SD: How about embroidered moccasins or anything like that?

MP: No, not like that. My mom used to darn a lot on mitts or socks, and she used to sew by hand. But beadwork, not too many people were interested in that in Crescent Lake anyway. My clothes were pretty well homemade. My mom made them by hand, no machine.

SD: How did your family celebrate special occasions like Christmas or New Year's, Easter?

MP: We celebrated as much as we could. We were poor. Sometimes, we didn't have anything at all, but we just celebrated with a meal that mom made. Dad had a few dollars to spare. There was always a store at Crescent Lake as well. You'd buy some sweets and prunes, and she'd make a rice pudding with raisins. Anyway, she'd make a few pies. Just make a meal, put a deer roast in the oven or whatever, simple meal potatoes and stuff. We celebrated that at every occasion. Instead of presents, we would hug each other. That's right, we couldn't afford presents. But the school used to give us a little bit. When I was going to school, they put up concerts. As a matter of fact, it was better than it is today. I see children go to concerts today. They get nothing, a little tiny bag of stuff. I remember that I got a pocket knife when they knew I was out hunting. Nice big pocket knife or a pair of good mitts. They gave good presents as well as a big bag of peanuts and candies and oranges. Today, you get nothing. We were poor, but we managed. That's why I say we managed. We had a lot of love to give. We were a close-knit family, actually a close-knit community. Nobody said no to you. They would give you their last pile of wood or they'd give you half of what they have. That's the way it was there. You don't see that today. You can't go say, "Can you lend me this or lend me that?" "No way." They got it, but they don't. It's always no. They knew how to help each other, and what was so important, there was a lot of respect. We had to have respect. Oh yes, I grew up with respect, learning respect. Believe me, I grew up with that. There is no respect today. You notice that? There isn't much respect today with the younger generation. Yeah, it was a hard life, but it was beautiful. I miss those days.

SD: Does anyone in your family speak Michif?

MP: Right now, I am the only one in my family that fluent. I got a sister who speaks a little bit. Some of them understand it, but they don't speak it. It makes me sad because I still have a few brothers and sisters who should know how to speak it. They understand it, but to me that's not good enough. I'd like to see them speak it as well.

SD: So, you can speak it fluently?

MP: Yeah.

SD: Do you know any traditional songs or stories in Michif or any traditional Métis stories?

MP: Just from my life experiences. Dad used to tell stories. I remember some of them, but there so long. I can tell stories of what happened in my life, my lifestyle. When I did my hunting and stuff like that, I used to stay out, and I would

get caught out in a storm many times. It takes a long time to tell stories. I used to walk for miles. I didn't care. I started off in the morning. I come home at night. A couple of times, I got caught in the storm. I couldn't even see. I came out of the bush to come home, and I couldn't see. The storm was so bad, blowing snow. I wasn't afraid. I had my little .22 and the little pocket knife, but dad always said, "Be prepared when you go somewhere my boy." I always had wooden matches and that's why you had that pocket knife, make little shavings out of dried wood. So, I just stayed right in the bush there. I dug myself an opening in a snow bank and made myself a little fire. I dragged poles of dry wood there and burned them all night. I just stayed there. Why should I be afraid? I got hungry, I just peeled part of my rabbit, and I cooked it right over top there. I went through that. Then I would come home the next morning. Mom would get worried. Dad used to say, "Don't worry. That boy will be okay. He will be home with some rabbits and stuff. He knows what to do." I was proud of that. Today, I can survive out there. I can survive out there a lot better than a lot of people can. A lot of people would panic. I never panic. You can't. You know if you panic, you're lost. I used to hurt myself sometimes, but I didn't panic. "I'll make it. I'll make it home." Yes, a lot of things happened to me. Like what I saw and what I told you. I will tell you a little short one here. About three years ago, I got permission to go to a river five miles west near Theodore, the next town from here. There used to be muskeg there years and years ago the farmer told me. There was a beaver there in the river. You can go down there and hunt any time at all. I didn't go that fall. I went the next fall and already, it was pretty well dried up. The muskeg was pretty well dried up. I thought there might have been muskrats there. Usually, there are a lot of muskrats in muskeg. I parked my old truck. I went about a half-a-mile in, I guess. I thought there might have been beaver there, but I couldn't see any fresh trees there. There should've been fresh trees there already. But I saw some fresh cutting on the side there. It looked fresh to me, but sometimes, a bigger tree will look fresh all winter because they don't dry up in the winter. So, I guess I was mistaken. But I wondered if the beaver would come. I was on a dam right across a creek like that, and there was an opening in the dam about this wide. I had these 12-inch conibear traps. That's what I use. It was about four feet deep. I saw right through to the bottom. The beaver house was from here to the car away. From where I was in the dam, in a puddle of water, I thought, "Should I set traps?" I set two traps like that right so to block that thing out. The beaver lodge should've been closed. They may have come across from over there I figured. They crossed over this way. As I was standing there, the dam water started moving and there was no wind. It was moving this way. What the hell. I looked, and it started getting worse, and all of a sudden, I started shaking. You know when it rains, when the rain drop hits the water and goes back up again? That's how the bubbles were coming up. I said, "What the hell is this?" I grabbed my traps right a way and cocked my gun. I had a .22 repeater. It holds 14 shells. It's a semi-automatic. All you gotta do is "bang, bang, bang." So, I looked over here to see where it was quite deeper. I saw something black coming. It was not anything: it was mud. The water got dirty. The water got straight muddy, and I could not see at all, and then it quieted down. I got the hell out of there. I didn't know what the hell it was, so I came home. I know the game wardens here really well. They're my buddies,

actually. So, I went and told them about this. They said, "Merv, could you go show us where you saw this?" I said, "Sure." So we went, and I showed them where it was. 'Yeah, you're right." he said. "There's no beaver here." So ,they couldn't figure out what that could be, and I told quit a few people. They still couldn't figure out what the hell that was. There was nothing there they said. Maybe the muskeg backed up there, and it kind of hid this little river part. Maybe there's something that's underneath there that was forcing its way up? Why would the water shake like that? Why would the water drops do that?

SD: What are your best memories about living in that Crescent Lake?

MP: My best memories, it was a good life, a hard life. It was fun, and it was a healthy life. It's a place I still treasure today. I just wish I could go back there. I really do. My best memories were that it was friendly. We had a lot of friends. We were just one big, great family. Everyone got a long so well. It was just so much fun. We used to skate. A government guy brought a bunch of skates to the school, and we'd just help ourselves. I grabbed a pair that was maybe four inches too big for me. But I wore a bunch of socks whenever I put on the skates. I skated around. I just had fun. We never minded how cold it was. We were out there. It was only water on the lake by where we used to live. We cleaned it up. A bunch of us kids were out there, especially in the moonlight. . I remember skating there no matter how cold it was. It was a lot of fun, a lot of fun.

SD: Are there any bad memories you would like to share?

MP: Bad memories, well no, not really. I guess when somebody passed away that would have been a bad memory. Everybody got a long so well. We helped each other out. It was harder maybe for some people. For most of us, I think we just loved it. We liked it. I am a helpful kind of a guy, and when somebody needed a load of wood, I would get wood for them with dad's horses. Some people were unable to do that, and let's face it some people lived on the easy side too and didn't care to help themselves. That was kind of sad. It wasn't bad, it was more sad than bad. There were no bad times actually. It was very sad when my grandma passed away. I was sitting beside her. She passed away right at the house. I don't remember bad times.

SD: How old were you when your grandma passed away like that?

MP: I was 19, just before I left home.

SD: How were the Métis treated in your community?

MP: They all think they were not treated well, not fairly because they couldn't get work in wintertime. They wanted to work in wintertime. We used to cut road allowances in the wintertime as well as scrub around sloughs. I figure they didn't get enough work, and they couldn't sell enough wood. I guess they were treated okay. Maybe some of them wanted more, but me and my family, we were satisfied with what we had. That's why I say we were happy. We were hard workers; we had to be. My dad was a hard worker and my mom used to stoke like a man. As a matter of fact, she beat a couple of her son-in-laws stoking. She was a "goer," I tell you. In them days, they had to be. Sweat like hell. Wet up a turban in cool water, put it on, and away they'd go again stoking. It didn't matter how hot it was. It was hard work, and we had to be there. We were treated all right.

SD: Did you family ever encounter racism from the larger community?

MP: In those days there was a lot of racism going on. There was a lot of it, no doubt about it, especially, if there was a mixture white and Michif. It's kind of funny. We walked down the street sometimes, and I recall seeing that stuff. Today, it's especially bad, but those days, it was not bad. We didn't mind because a lot of us accepted that. Sure, we'd got mad, but today, a lot of us are still called that. There is still some of that around, but a lot of it is gone. The funny part is when you were going down the street, you were called an "Indian," but today you get called a "Métis." It's a bit sad and bad. It's a thing I don't care for. I don't care if you call me a name, I am, who I am. That's all there is to it. I don't care if you call me a baboon or a monkey or whatever, I am who I am and I am proud of who I am, and I am thankful. I am just as good as anybody else. Nobody is better than me, and I am not better than anybody else.

SD: Do you have any specific examples of racism when you lived in Crescent Lake?

MP: No, not really, except name calling. I was in the militia for six months. I joined when I was 18, and I got out before I was 19. There, we got along we got along well with the other people. There were only white people there and there were no Treaty Indians there, just Métis and white people. We got along just perfect. The same thing at the school, we got along. There were a few white kids from school. We got along with them. I was brought up to get along with people, not to be a bully or to be racist against anybody because I got something, he hasn't got. We were never brought up like that. We were brought up to never touch anything. That's what my dad used to teach me, the first thing when we were out. He said, "If you see anybody's trap and if you see a live animal in there, kill it and leave it there. You are helping that guy out. He's trapping for a purpose. He's trapping to make a living as well. Don't ever forget that," he said. I came upon a lot of trapped animals. I kill them and leave them there. That's how I was brought up, and I loved it. I loved it.

SD: When did people leave Crescent Lake and why?

MP: That was kind of a stupid deal, a rotten deal because of a Catholic priest. The older people know that. The potash mine opened. I think it was in '64. Father Dale came around here and promised jobs to the people. He promised homes closer to the potash mine, the K1 Mine, by Esterhazy. He moved a lot of people there, and he was helpful. A lot of people moved there, but as soon as the people moved out, the houses were wrecked.

SD: Who was the name of this priest anyways?

MP: Father Dale, that's just how I knew him. His last name, I am not quite sure. Where did he get the horses from? You'd have an idea of why he did that, right?

SD: Why did he do that?

MP: Why did he do that? Somebody else wanted the people out of there.

SD: Who?

MP: Well, you have an idea, don't you? It has to be the government, who else?

SD: Exactly.

MP: Yeah, it had to be the government. Because you know that school was a pilot project. We used to have a co-op there. We were coming up. Was that the reason why or what, I don't know.

SD: What was the co-op?

MP: We used to get together, and we would put in one big garden, about 15-20 acres of potatoes and vegetables. We all chipped in to buy chicks. We had chickens there. We made a big, long chicken coup, and we all shared that, and it worked well. It lasted a couple of years and that was it. Some people gave up on it, and some people were getting a little greedy about this and that. But in those days, they should have had a committee or something, but there wasn't one. It was just all one big family. It got a little bigger and some though, "They got more potatoes than I have." A potato is a potato, as long as the bags are the same size. That was actually the only issue, and it was not that big or anything. That was that co-op. It worked well.

SD: What year did the Métis people leave Crescent Lake for the potash mine?

MP: They left around '64, '65, and '66, in those years. They left slowly, and the ones who stayed back, Father Dale gave them a few dollars to help tear down the houses. It didn't matter what the people left behind; it was all burned up. They made sure they didn't move back. When they signed those lease papers, as long as one family stayed there, people were able to get Crescent Lake back. They could move back there again, but that never did happen. And there was one family who always stayed there, the Brazeaus. They were a big part of Crescent Lake. He's still there as a matter of fact. Now, his son is leasing land. That was quite a few years ago already, and I don't think 99 years was up yet to be honest with you. What I can't understand and a lot of them couldn't understand was, how could you slap a lease on top of another lease? There is no such thing. People didn't give up that place. They would have worked with the intention of coming back. But when there was no home to come back to, they just gave up. There was nothing there to come back to then. It was like a ghost town. It's sad, but it was also accepted.

SD: So can you tell me again, where your grandparents were originally from?

MP: Old Louis, on my mother's side, was from Manitoba. I am not sure exactly where in Manitoba, but like my dad's side they were all from the States.

SD: Whereabouts in the States?

MP: Dunseith, North Dakota, around Belcourt. That's where my dad used to register in Belcourt. He was registered in Belcourt, and the two older ones were registered there as well.

SD: As a First Nation?

MP: No, as Métis people, but that First Nations thing didn't come in 'till not that long ago. In the States, they are all treated the same. My older brother, he passed away now, they were both registered there.

SD: What do you mean registered?

MP: You had to have your name on a list to indicate that you are a U.S. citizen. I remember when I went there, they were going to deport me back, but I was staying at my girlfriend's place, and her mom spoke up for me. "You can't take this guy back." The Highway patrol and sheriff were going to take me back because I was working there, and they said, "You are not allowed to be here at all." She spoke up for me, and said, "You take him, and we'll go to Belcourt right now. We'll go and prove that his dad come from the States." So, they couldn't kick me out because of that.

SD: Do you know if any of your ancestors were involved in the 1885 Resistance?

MP: Not that I know of. They could have been.

SD: So you served in the military for six months, did anyone else in your family served in the military?

MP: My brother. He's passed on now, and a couple of my first cousins, my dad's brothers' boys. Two of them were there. I guess there was about ten of us from Crescent Lake that were involved in that. So, I passed that anyway, and I was supposed to go to the regular army from there. They gave me two weeks leave, but my girlfriend didn't want me to go. I didn't know this, but she was going to have a baby, and she kept me back home. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to leave in a way, but she meant a lot to me, our first child. I stayed back home.

SD: You had a couple of brothers that also went?

MP: Yeah.

SD: Did they just do the militia like you?

MP: Just the militia.

SD: So that was six months of training?

MP: Yeah, six months of training. Then we were supposed to be shipped to a base near Halifax. We were going to join the PPCLI with a few older people like my uncle Dan Pelletier. My dad's brother was in the war. My dad was never in the army. My dad had two brothers actually, they were twins. One of them was name Sandy and one of them was Dan. They were both in World War One.

SD: Was anybody in your family involved with the Métis Society?

MP: I am part of a Métis local myself right now.

SD: Did anyone work as a president or a treasurer or anything like that in the Métis local?

MP: Just in the locals, yes. That's the only place, not in the main office or anything. Yeah, I am the president of the Crescent Lake local right now.

SD: Are you?

MP: That's right. I used to put on a lot of sports days every summer, but now it's leased out. This guy won't let it go. He's a little hard to get along with. I couldn't even rent it from him. That really hurt me. I grew up there. As a matter of fact, my family moved there before that guy was even there. So, I had more rights than he had, but he just refused to let people go there. With no place to go, we used to go on the other side, where people used to have a quarter of land. We used to make hay for the horses, but that was sold. That was not leased, not that part. We were just allowed to go there because it was crown land, but somehow, this Martin got a hold of that quarter and they bought it, and they had papers and everything. I used to put a few things up there. I think I did that for four or five years on their land. Now somebody else bought that land. They didn't want us to go there any more, so it was pretty well beat. Now, if I want to put something on, I have to get land some place else, and I have to raise my own money for that. It's hard, but I only did this for my people, my culture. That's why I call my culture inspirational. I used to play horseshoe and play the old games like "little knife," "canny can" and stuff like that.

SD: What is that?

MP: That's when you put up three cans, any size you want. You put up three cans, two cans on each side and one on top, and you roll a ball and try to knock the cans down. There is a guy who stands in front with a bat trying to hit that ball. If you miss and knock down the cans, you are out. They're a lot of fun. It's an old game. Slingshot contests, all kinds of stuff like that. With GDI, we

made a little video about Crescent Lake. I was teaching kids how to set rabbit snares and how to set gopher traps.

SD: Yeah I think I saw that. You were teaching others how to build a log cabin?

MP: Yeah, I was speaking my language, too, and how to plaster and so forth. I was involved with a lot of things, and today I am involved with white society. They need my help for fundraising. They'll phone me up and say, "Merv, can you come over we need some help?" "Yeah, sure. Why not?" I help anybody.

SD: Do you have anything else you'd like to share about growing up in Crescent Lake?

MP: Well, I guess I didn't tell you everything. If I was to tell you everything, you'd be sitting here for a week. I'd really like to have a lot of time to talk about that because it's nice to share it with somebody, like so many things I saw in my life, so many things that happened in my life. It's nice to share with someone that's a good listener. I have this one here who just called. He is 19 years old, and I tell him this stuff when I was a kid. I was 14 years old when I shot my first deer, and I skinned that deer as well in the bush. I had to walk home, about four miles and tell my dad. It was already dark when we got the deer with the horses. But I marked my trail breaking trees, branches. Dad had an old flashlight and we took that along. We got that deer. I hung it up myself, I was strong enough. After I skinned it, I hung it up with some twine. I hung it up there, so the coyotes couldn't touch it. So, we picked it up. A lot of things happened to me; funny things have happened a lot of the times. I got caught in my own trap a lot of times. I got caught few times because a muskrat would come and pull his feet and face away. My trap would be way down there. You can't find it in ice cold water. You can't wear mitts; you dig them down there. I almost got caught. Holy shit! (laugh)

SD: Like the kind that snaps shut?

MP: Yeah, they are snap traps, but muskrat traps are not big. They're not that solid. They're not strong enough to break your bones or anything, but I am telling you they still hurt because your hand is already cold. You got to take things as they come. It was a hard life in a way. It was a rough life in a way. I knew what hard work was. I knew what hunger was, but I loved it, and I would never give up that life for anything else. If I had it back again, I would do it all over again. That's why you see me here in the country. I think I am the only one out in the country here around Crescent Lake. The rest of them are in town. I am not a town guy. I go to Yorktown and do my shopping, and I want out. Yeah, I feel free out here. I got fresh air. I can go out with my gun, and go walking around, things I can't do in town. When I was in Calgary, I got sick there. I actually got sick because of that. I felt choked in. I had a good job. I worked at U of C, and I made good money. I told the wife, "I can't stand it honey. I got to go back. I got to get out of here." I don't like open country, either. I couldn't live on that. I just couldn't make it, so I moved back here. That was about ten years ago, and I will never leave here now. No, this is me here. What you see here is me. I don't have much, but there's happiness here. What else do I need? There's love here and happiness. That's all I am asking for: simple things in life. That's all I have: simple things, but you know what, I am surviving, and I got a lot of happiness in me, and I got a lot of love to give for my family. Everybody comes here. I'll die out here.

SD: We'll leave it there for now.