

Gilbert Pelletier Interview by Norman Fleury – English Paraphrase

My name is Gilbert Pelletier. I was born here in Crescent Lake, close to Yorkton. My dad was Joe Pelletier and Isabelle. My mother is a Flamand. My mother was born in Canada and dad in the States. I don't remember whereabouts. We were fifteen in our family. There were seven girls and eight boys. We lived in Bredenbury and Saltcoats so some of the kids were born there. Wherever Dad worked some of the kids were born there. We lived close to my mom's parents and the Grandbois. We lived about a mile from our grandparents. My mom's parents. The Grandbois didn't live too far from us. That was my grandpa's sister, her name was Veronique Flamand. The old man was Louis Grandbois. We lived in Alberta for awhile then we came back to Yorkton. We lived in Estherhazy. I worked there in the mine and we also lived in Yarbo. There were only two houses and a store I think in Yarbo.

I worked a lot for farmers. I picked stones, roots, and fencing. I was good at doing things on a farm. I also hauled hay. Wherever dad took jobs, I worked stooking or threshing. I worked with my older brother. Whenever you got a job, you were wanted there again so you had a job threshing. We worked for a dollar a day. You got paid by the job or sometimes we bartered for chickens or pigs for our pay. We also traded for meat. My dad would butcher a hog in the winter and also trapped. Dad taught me to trap as I wasn't too good at it. So dad taught me how. I was good at killing muskrats and I hung snares for squirrels. My mother was the one that skinned and stretched whatever dad killed. She even skinned mink and stretched them. We sold squirrels and jack rabbits. We got fifty cents for the jack rabbits. We got twenty-five cents for the squirrels. The mink were a good price. He got fifty to sixty dollars for a big mink and twenty dollars for a small one. You got more money for a male mink because they were bigger and had better fur. The muskrats are in prime in the springtime and minks only in the winter and weasels. He didn't kill too many beaver. My dad had a technique at trapping mink. When dad finished trapping then I trapped. My dad had ways of trapping mink. When he saw where the mink got into a hole, Dad went around and set traps wherever the mink might have other holes. He would smidge the hole with smoke. The mink hated the smoke. We had my brother's dog who liked to hunt mink. The dog sniffed around and when he started to dig you knew the mink was there. The dog also would scare them out. There weren't too many times that the mink got away from the dog. You would have never sold a good dog like that one because he helped make you a living. It was just an ordinary dog who would go along hunting. My brother also hitched him to a sleigh. He was useful in many ways. When us kids were playing, the dog never left us. There were a lot of coyotes around where we were. When mom called us when it got dark then he came home with us. There would have been no price for that dog. He would not have let anyone borrow the dog. He loaned his horses but not the dog. He lent the horses, harness, money, but not the dog.

We were raised in the Michif language. Those days they said we speak Cree not like today, everyone says Michif. We only spoke Michif. My grandma, my grandpa, uncles, aunties, cousins all spoke Michif. They didn't speak English. My dad spoke different languages like French and Saulteaux. Mom had a hard time with other languages. My mom only spoke Cree. She couldn't speak French or Saulteaux.

I don't remember my mom's mother, she passed on long ago. I remember my mom's dad. My mom's mother passed away when my mom was a little girl. My grandfather remarried. I knew that old lady. My

mom called her mother. I called her Grandma. My mother's aunty married a First Nations man from the Little Bone Reserve. Her mother's sister. My mother's mom was a Henry. There were Henrys and Allarys but they were the same people. My mother's relatives came from around Yorkton. My dad's parents came from the States. My dad was born in the States. My dad's dad was called Abraham and his mom was called Helen. I remember dad's mother. My grandpa died before we were born. I remember my grandmother talking about a long time ago when she was young. She talked about when they travelled and moved around. She talked about being in big camps. There were fights between First Nations and Métis. They fought against the Sioux. I heard her talk about only the Sioux. They travelled by Red River carts pulled by horses. They had to watch their horses because someone like the Indians would steal them. Nowadays the word Shavaag is not used. People don't like to be called that. Years ago it was accepted. They would even call themselves Shavaag. The Métis are Shavaag in the States and here in Canada they are Michif. We have a lot of relatives in the States. The Michif in the States live all over the place. Not like the Indians here that live on a Reserve. In the States, they live all over in towns and rural areas. I have more relatives in the States than I do in Canada. The American Government cares for the people. They get commodities. They also work all over the place on farms picking potatoes. There were places that Michif lived but didn't own their land. They would move away and leave everything behind. They couldn't sell because they didn't own. My brother and I used to go and work in the States. They treated us well because they were our family, our relatives. My dad's dad came to Canada. He went up north to hunt. They lived all over the place. My grandpa was a good hunter and trapper and that is how my dad learned. I think it was the early nineteen hundreds when they came over here from the States. My dad remembered he was very young when they came over here. If my mom was living, she would have been in her nineties and dad would have been over a hundred. My grandmother lived to be over a hundred. My grandmother died in the sixties.

My grandmother and grandfather were good at telling legends. I also remember my grandfather's dad. They talked about Chi Jean, Nanapoosh, Wiisakaychak and they also talked about the little man with the long beard. This was a little man that had a long beard and he had to lift his beard so he wouldn't step on it, my grandfather would tell us. They used to talk about lii roogaroo (werewolves). They told these stories in winter but especially during lent. We lost all of this when we went to school. We couldn't talk or practice this around the school. I have never forgotten my language. Some of my family have forgotten and some won't and can't speak Michif. My younger family members only speak English. They don't know their language, they traded or exchanged their language for English. I think those that forget their culture, language purposely can be bothered by it. It is like they are cursed. I will never forget how I was raised and my language. I am now the oldest. I lost two older brothers and one sister. They spoke Michif (Cree). When we would visit mom she spoke to us in Michif. When she had younger visitors, she had to speak to them in English because they couldn't understand Michif.

My dad passed away around 1975-76. He spoke to us only in Cree (Michif). My dad spoke English and French. He worked with us in the mine. There were French people from Quebec working with us and he was able to speak to them. We worked in Estherhazy mine. We use a lot and did a lot work with the shovel. There were a lot of things happening. Some were building, some operating machinery.

When we lived in Crescent Lake the older people played the violin (fiddle), that was the main instrument. Us young people made an instrument with a comb and cigarette paper. We then got a mouth organ. Then one of my cousins bought an accordion and that was our main instrument. The old people made a dance with fiddle and guitar. The dances were Drops of Brandy, jigs, polkas, square dances, and waltzes. My godfather Frank Flamand was a good caller. He taught me to call and then I was one of the callers. I could still call if I wanted to. My Aunt Vitaline's father played the fiddle and I think that's where the boys learned. My Aunt Vitaline's youngest brother played fiddle and guitar. He was quite good. Alex Allary also played the fiddle. Arthur Flamand was as good a fiddle player as Andy Desjarlis. Years ago the old people sang in French and not Cree. I would have a hard time to find a person to sing French songs like long ago today. My dad and my grandfather sang those old French songs.

Years ago the celebration was New Years. Wherever you went to visit you were fed. Some people walked and some travelled with horses. Only the old men had a drink, not the young people. They would buy a gallon of wine, wasn't very expensive. Only the old men were given a drink. The people made money from trapping and hunting to prepare for New Years. My dad trapped all night, then mom would skin and stretch the furs. Sometimes he would sell the mink without skinning so he could have quick money to buy things for New Years celebrations. Everyone served lii boulettes (meatballs) wherever you went. There were pies, little cookies with raisins and cake, and served a lot of bannock. Years ago the old ladies were good cooks, not like today. The young people don't cook like that. There was lots to eat for New Years and dancing every night.

Christmas was only for kids. Dad didn't celebrate or have a drink but never forgot to get us something for Christmas. We didn't wait for Santa but we hung our stockings. My brother caught Santa filling the stockings. We slept on the floor and Santa stepped on him when Santa stepped over home (laughs). He just about ruined the surprise (laughs). But Dad never forgot Christmas, he'd buy a little car or tractor. We didn't sleep too long because we were excited. I never went to midnight mass but the old people did. The old people were good Catholics. My grandmother never left home without her rosary. My grandmother would walk to town and praying as she walked. When we were at the wake is when the old people would tell stories and legends and us young kids would sit and listen. Nowadays people play cards and drink. We had the wake for one or two days. Sometimes people would help to have the person that passed on in giving clothing. Good clothing was hard to come by. When I was a young person as I remember the family took care of their own arrangements and not the funeral parlour. It wasn't just anyone that could work with dead people. It had to be someone special. That person would prepare the body. Wash, dress, clean, and shave. That dead person was prepared and then put on boards with the homemade casket. Someone also had to make the coffin. Others would help each other. The Elders would lead the rosary. They said the rosary at different times. After midnight and also before they took the body out of the house and to the church. They held the wake in the people's homes. They hung a white sheet, decorated with whatever they had like a cross or rosaries and they also lit candles. I forget what they called the arm bands in Michif. That's what the pallbearers wore. A pallbearer was a special chosen person. They didn't want a person who drank a lot and also swore. The friends and relatives were the pallbearers who were chosen. Nowadays the young people don't follow the old ways

(traditions). They drink and play cards. Years ago they told stories and legends and visited. Years ago, people mourned for a year. Nowadays they dance, sing, and get married right away. Years ago you were told the ways, today some are told but they have no respect I'd say and they don't believe things.

If we don't save our language, everyone won't know how we lived and no one will know our language. Our language won't be used and everyone will forget Michif. I love the sound of my language and I use it and never will forget it. It is already pitiful as we lost a lot. We the speakers are the only ones that can save this language. Those that lived and know the life of the Michif can only save who we are, not those that don't know.

My wife is Mary. My children are Gail, Gilbert, Eleanor, and the youngest Avaline. Some live in Dunseith and Yorkton. My daughter lives in my house in Dunseith. I live close to Bredenbury where mom and dad used to work for farmers. We worked around here and I know all the farmers around here. I like living here. Since I retired we play cards, Ski-doo with my son. My wife doesn't like Ski-doos. I go to derbies with my son. We take rides with the kids. I have horses and I used to raise chickens and pigs. I don't anymore because we go out visiting a lot now. I still go on horseback. I used to drive my horses. That used to be our only mode of transportation.