



GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE

of Native Studies and Applied Research

Interview of Elder Nora Cummings

Conducted by David Morin

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1) Could you please tell me your name and your home community?

My name is Nora Louise Ouellette-Cummings. I am from Saskatoon. I was born and raised here. I am a road allowance Métis

2) Where did you grow up?

Here in Saskatoon. We lived where Aden Bowman Collegiate is. That's where our settlement was, but my family moved in from Round Prairie. They came up from the States at the time of the rebellion, and they ended up staying in Round Prairie just south of the White Cap Reserve. In 1932, they came to Saskatoon when my mother was 14 years of age. They settled in the area where we are, and that's where I was brought up on the road allowance. I was born here at City Hospital. That's where I lived until 1953. They moved us off our land. Where we lived on road allowance there were 35 families and that's where we lived until 1953. I call it that because that's where my home was and it was the only one that I had until then in my life. This is my home and this is my community. All my children live here.

3) Where have you lived most of your life?

Where I live now that's where I lived all my life, and my children all lived in the same area. There are eight of them all living in that area. They all have their homes there. I am happy and I am so excited because this is the land I know. This is what we harvest.

This is where we lived. So, it's exciting for me. A lot of the time, people don't realize the rich history that's there. We lived in our tents and our shacks. I lived in a tent until just before Christmas, and then I moved into a shack. Actually, to be honest, the tent was warmer than the shack because we lived in the bush and had a stove in it. It had a wooden floor which my dad made. The Métis traditional tents had the high walls. He got some old tin and put it sort of like walls, so it very warm in the middle of the bush. Yes, I enjoyed growing up here. I think that people don't understand it was a community, and it was full of relatives: kohkums, aunties, mooshums, and cousins. We kept the family very close, and I lived a lot with my kohkum because my mother had to go out and do house work and my dad hayed. Of course, when I got older, I worked with my dad. I had my own team of horses, and we would go out and

do the haying. Then, I would have my team, and he hauled sod for the exhibition greenhouse, the Chinese gardens. I had to get up early in the morning, and we ploughed until late. We put sod on the wagons and took it to there. I worked alongside of my father because my brother was just a young one and my sister was more the feminine type, she didn't do those things. I was like a boy. I worked with my dad, and I had my own team of horses. My dad had done a number of things to survive. He dug basements in the city. We went out haying. He didn't get out to the rock fields, like my uncles. He made his living here in the city. The families I grew up with had stuck around: they all remain. The sad part was when they moved us off the land. I always say, "Our land" because that's where I was born and raised. That all changed when they split us up because we didn't have that closeness as a Métis community anymore because everybody had to live in different places in different areas of the city. The majority of my family kept pretty close. We had a few families that stayed close by, which was good. It all petered out in the early '60s when people just started moving away for better living conditions and to get better jobs. That's where we lost a lot of our family connections. But at New Year's, it brought all our family together. New Year's was our traditional day. They would set the table and then would start the jiggling and fiddling. They still do that. I still do that every New Year's. 60 to 70 people come through my house every New Year's, and I make the bullets and the traditional foods. I want to keep that up for my grandchildren. This year, I was kind of feeling sorry for myself. Now, I don't do as much as I used to. I am getting up there in age, and I was feeling guilty that my daughter and granddaughter would come. I was telling her, "Maybe this will be the last year." My grandchildren said, "No Granny we're going to continue with this. You just sit there and tell us what to do and so it's going to continue." I taught them this time. They always say, "I have good bullets, and they say, "You always do it well, and we don't know how. Every time we make ours, they fall apart." So, I showed them what to do this year, and they made the bullets. I told my company that they made them, and I said, "You guys are the testers." They were good. So, they were so pleased that their bullets turned out good. I have 29 grandchildren and I have 38 great-grandchildren. I have seven boys and two girls. I lost two: my daughter and my son. I still have 6 boys and a girl. She's very well loved by all her brothers. She has sister-in-laws, so there is family. Yes, we have a very close family. They're very busy, but we do take time for family gatherings. That's a thing I instilled in my children. I've said to them, "I know it's a busy world out there, but we have to take time to connect and visit and continue to our traditions not only for yourselves but for your children and your grandchildren." So, we get together quite often. All my grandchildren still come around, and my grandboys phone me, they are the older ones. They phone me once a week to tell me that they love me. I am very blessed. I've got a lot of lovely gifts. When my children were small, they used to say, "So and so has got this. How come we don't have that?" I told them, "You know, we have a big family." We don't have the money and we're struggling to put food on the table. I used to tell them, "We're so rich." My one boy said, "How can we be rich? We don't have things my friends have." I said, "We have love. We have food on our table. We have a roof over our head. We got good health, and you have people that love you. Money can't love you. He looked at me, but they never said anything. It's so funny because I hear them telling their children the same thing. So, it must have sunk in,

and it makes me feel good. I guess that some of my teachings to my children stayed with them. When I was growing up, I lived with my grandmother. My kohkum taught me my culture, and my understanding of who I was as a Métis person. I lived with her, and she lived with me after I got married and had all my children until she passed away. I had a lot of good teachings from her. I have a lot of beautiful memories as a Métis. She was so proud of me. She used to say, "Proud Michif Niya." She would say, "Le Michif, Le Michif. Don't forget that!" She was very proud. When we would have to harvest our big gardens every year, all my family members would work on that. We would harvest that, and everyone had taken their part of the vegetables. That's how we did that. Of course, we went hunting and we had moose meat, not as much though as deer meat. We had lots of deer and rabbits. We canned because we had no refrigerators. We dug holes in the dirt and bush and put great big cans in there. That was our refrigerator. I used to tell my kids about that. They always laugh about it. It was so unique because everybody lived so close. We had two big cook stoves outside. Everybody would come and cook, so everybody shared. The thing that I find unique about us as Métis people is that we borrow. We always learned to share. We like to have material things, but we can do without them because we're survivors. We survive all the time. When I sit back and think of my life growing up there, I wouldn't change it. I wouldn't change my life. I have a good life. Times changed, though. After my uncles came back from the war, everybody's life changed. We used to feel so safe, and when we moved out of that environment, we didn't feel that safe anymore. I didn't have that safety with me. It took along time to get that. I always tell stories to my children and grandchildren. Sometimes, they'll come over and we start talking, and of course the kids get involved. They start talking about their days growing up in the area. Sometimes, I will see some of this older stuff that we used, and I say, "Oh my goodness, if I would have saved that. Look at it. I would have been rich!" They always laugh at me, "You used that?" I was telling them when I use to have to wash the clothes on the wash boards. I used to have to do that. My uncles always used to wear white shirts. Don't ask me why they always wore white shirts. I made sure that they where clean. My cousin and I would hang them on the line. So many times, I can remember bringing those clothes inside. We had to hit them with a broom and get all the frost out of them and hang them. You know our little shacks were warm and there was always room. We only had one room at my kohkum's which had a bed, cook stove and tables. The kids say, "Why didn't you get cupboards and stuff?" I said that was not a problem: the old apple boxes and oranges boxes would be so high that they have a little shelf in between to divide them. We took those and piled them on top and made beautiful curtains. So those were our cupboards and those were our dressers. We had to be unique in order to make things like that. I remember that we had to do embroidery. As you know, Métis people are very competitive, and of course, when people visited, the women wanted to make sure they had the best table cloth or little curtains. I can remember that so well. I went around and watched my aunties, and they would always make sure everything was done up. I don't know how we lived in those houses when I think about the winters; they were tarpaper houses with hardly any wood to them. I remember our bedding used to stick to the wall in the winter. We were healthy, though. We didn't get sick and everybody got along. I mean some of them had a bad few days, but I am talking about for such a small little environment to

live in, we all got along. I remember we all shared a bed. We had old army beds and pulled them out. I didn't like sleeping in the middle bed because I was the shortest one. I liked the corner. I was raised with my cousins. They were boys, of course. I think I was a tomboy and we used to have competitions in chopping and sawing wood. I gave them a run for their money. We hauled wood and water because we had to bring water from the sloughs out there. That was for the washing, and then we would haul the wood, and we chopped and stored it for winter because we needed that. For entertainment, we got big round logs and we dug the deepest hole we could, and we put it in and dad and others would get us 2X4s or wide boards, and that was our merry-go-round. I remember the big spikes we put in, and that was our merry-go-round. Then we had the chopping competition, and that's another form of fun. I always say our people were psychologists because they make our work feel like a game, not work but fun times. Our grandmas and grandpas, I always think they were physiologists. When I think about it now, they always had you do things like that. It was work, but we didn't take it as hard work. It was something that they would tell us. Before we knew it, we had all the wood corded. We picked up all the woodchips and put them in containers because they would start the fire in the mornings. Then Kohkum made beautiful taffy and she would be stretching that candy and telling us stories. When you think about the education we got plus our culture being taught and then how, we were learned to do the sports, there was never a dull moment. We had teeter-totters or were cowboys on the horses. So we had a lot of entertainment as kids. It was hard work a lot of times, but we were rewarded. I remember when she used to tell my cousin and me, early in the morning, to take our little white handkerchiefs that she gave us and go outside and hold up to see which way the wind was coming from. She said, "You guys are the weatherman. That's how you tell the weather." The whole area of Aden Bowman Collegiate in Saskatoon was our garden. There we planted every kind of vegetable that we could. As kids, we had to weed that, but we never let it wait until it got out of hand. When the plants started to grow, they would take the potatoes and the veggies. My grandma would say to me, "Oh you cook so well today. You will make a good wife." I would take some little green onions and mash them all up and put these little green onions in there and that's fancy cooking. I was feeling good about myself. Of course, I would cook pots of potatoes and put this all in and not knowing that's the way she was encouraging me instead of just saying, "No, we don't do that." There was about six of us and it did not take long to clean the gardens and stuff. Then we'd pick berries: chokecherries, Saskatoon berries, and high bush cranberries. We would crush the chokecherries. Those were stories that the kids would laugh about. They would always ask me about that. We stoked the berries but one night they were dry, so we decided to eat these chokecherries. Well, if we didn't get sick. They were so worried that there was something wrong with us. They didn't want to take us into City Hospital which was quite far away. Then they found out what we ate. Let me tell you the red willow came out we got well in no time! When I think back to the good days, sometimes I sit in my house and my husband, and I talk because he is from up north. We talk about our days growing up, and although he had a rougher life than I had, he said to me, "You know when you think about it. We were rich and we had it good." When I look back, I see all the issues facing our people in the city. We didn't see that. We didn't know what that was. We never knew what social services were and we didn't

know what police were. I remember the one time I was playing, this RCMP member came by riding a horse, and I was just shocked to see this. Grandma called to us in Michif, "You kids go and hide." They were scared of police. I didn't know why they were scared of the police, but she made us all go and hide. I wanted to see because he had this big red jacket, and I thought it was nice. That was the one fear that they had. I don't know why. I think it was just because of the rebellion. That was the fear of the police, so I don't know what else to tell you.

4) Who were/are your parents and grandparents? Where were they from?

My mother was a Trotchie. Her father was Peter Trotchie and his dad was Charles Trottier (Trotchie). He was the one who brought my family to Round Prairie from Havre. On her mother's side, she was a Landry and they were from Great Falls, Montana.

That's who is in those pictures: Philomene and Moise Landry. That's on the Landry's side, but my grandmother married into the Trottiers. Then they had eight children. On my dad's side, he was an Ouellette and my grandpa and his family came from Lewiston, Montana. On my dad's side, grandpa married my kohkum, Elizabeth Dumont who was Gabriel Dumont's niece. Her dad and Gabriel were brothers. I have Dumont, Landry, Trotchie, and Ouellette as my ancestors, so I come from a very strong Métis background. They all married as Métis. It was funny growing up. My dad used to be called Jerry. I always knew him as Jerry, and I found out when I got older his name was Jerome. I used to always ask him why he didn't have a second name. It was Jerome Ouellette. My mother was Irene Mary. Everyone took saints' name when they grew up, and she was Irene Mary.

5) How did you spend your life as an adult regarding work, family, or in any other ways you'd like to share?

I went to school here in Saskatoon. It was called St. Joseph's School. It's where Oskayak School is, and at that time, 70% of the children were Métis. There were no First Nations, but there were Aboriginal students. The majority was Métis because we had a lot of Métis people, and that's why I went to school there. I didn't get much of an education there. That was a day school, and we endured a lot of ugliness in that school. Nuns ran it, and I didn't get much of an education, and a lot of our people that went there never got much of an education because they never taught us anything. They taught us how to scrub floors in the gym. We never had a good education. I remember the nuns asking us to stand up, and we stood up and we were called savages. I didn't know what a savage was. I thought that was pretty nice that they were giving us a name. We all felt this until I went home and my grandmother was so upset about this. One nun made us girls wash the floor, and she said, "You'll be a good wife." She was so mean to us. In Grade 5, I quit school when I was 14. I said, "I can't, I can't go anymore." I just turned 15 and I babysat then. I was 15, and I got a job at the Paris Café which was on 2nd Ave and, and 20th Street East. At that time, you could just fill out a form and then go to work. It's how you got your social insurance card. It was a little stamp book. I told them I was 16, and so I worked there for about a year. Then I ended up getting married young and raised all my kids. My job was at home. So that

and looking after old people, that was my role and that's what I did. It wasn't till 1970 when we started getting involved with the Métis Nation locals here. In 1971, I went back into the work force. Jim Sinclair and Jim Durocher offered me a job to be a fieldworker. I didn't know what a fieldworker was, and they said, "You will have an office." I thought, "Oh my God, what will I do in an office? I am so dumb. I don't have that kind of an education and what would I be doing?" While they were interviewing me, I couldn't look at them. I just looked at my feet. When I left home to come into the real world, it was hard for me because I was protected. I would never eat in a restaurant in front of people unless my husband was with me. When I got married, my husband did everything for me. My husband came in the store with me to shop for groceries.

If I had to walk into a restaurant to go meet him, I wouldn't go in. I would stand outside until he came. That's the thing that would endure for me from this school was that I didn't feel good about myself because I was a brown face. People would look at me like that. It was my deceased husband who edged me and pushed me. Then I had all my children, and I said, "I don't know if I can take the job. I got kids." I had all kind of excuses because I always had that fear, and they wouldn't take no for an answer. I said, "Let me go home and talk to my husband and my kids." When I did, the kids were excited. My husband was excited, and he said, "Take it!" I said to him, "I will." He hadn't been well. He started to not feel well. I started off when I first got my job at 75 dollars a month and I thought I was rich because I lived on a very fixed income. I told them how shy I was. I went to my Mooshum's funeral. There were so many big families that I wouldn't eat in front of them in case I chewed funny or something. I fainted at his funeral, and to make it worse, I had crazy cousins and they would say, "Did you drink vanilla?" That made it worse. I just couldn't wait until that wake was over, so I could go home. When I tell that story, they all say, "Nora you can't tell me you were shy!" Many times, I thanked Jim Sinclair, and I went to see him before he passed away, and I thanked him. I told him, "Jim, for me, you made me the person I am today and you made me proud to stand up for myself and to talk for myself. So I thank you." A couple years after I become a field worker for the Métis Society, Jim came to me, and said, "There is money for women, but you guys have to organize. I am going to help you." They helped me alright. They got us going. I was so scared because I didn't write well, and my friend did the writing, and I learned how to speak well. We did all those things. I said to her, "What am I going to do?" She said, "You do the talking and I'll do the writing." I said, "Okay," and my knees were just shaking. Two of my elder women were Josephine Pambrun and Mrs. Lavallee. They were my mentors. They taught me how to go out and talk with people and to not be afraid and encourage me. That's where I grew to be the person I am. I never stopped working after that. My youngest was seven years old when I went to work, but after that I would go out and speak in public. I ran for city council in 1974. I was the first aboriginal person in Saskatoon to ever do that. I did that in three weeks. We were connected with community groups. Vicki Wilson also ran, and another woman ran in the ward, but she was not Métis. It took me awhile to makeup my mind to run. People said, "We didn't think you were scared. We always thought you were a strong person. Think of your people." So, they kind of sucked me into this. I said, "Okay. I will do it," not realizing all the stuff that had to come into place. Then, the next day, there were

people coming to bring documents for signing. "Oh my God," I said, "what did I get myself into?" That was when I found out what discrimination was all about in this city. Judge Barry Singer was my campaign manager at the time. He was with me doing speaking engagements with the unions and stuff like that. I received letters telling me that I should quit and that all native women were prostitutes, and all our children belong to different dads. It was just awful and I was scared. I never endured anything like this, and when I was speaking, I used to think, "Who is in this crowd?" I wouldn't take my oldest boy and the second oldest used to come, but I didn't want them to come with me because I thought that in case something happened, at least it's me and not my children. I went home and said to my husband, "I am pulling out of the race." I said, "I am not scared for myself, but for my children." We lived in a sort of middle-class area and had a home for our kids. I was scared if they went to school, they might do something to them. He said to me, "If you quit now, you will quit all your life and you will run. Is what you want your children to see? I said, "No," but I was scared. So I went to bed that night, and I said my prayer. I thought, "No, he is right. If I quit, my children will take that pattern in life." So the next day, I got up just as feisty as any other time. I got 51 votes. I wanted 50. She got 52 votes, and she wanted 50, but it opened a door and from there on it never stopped. One day, I was sitting at home, and I thought, "You know, I can do something for myself in terms of my education." At that time, you could write your GED. I went down and never told anyone that I wrote my GED. They told me that they would send me a note in the mail and I got my letter that day. I was all by myself, and I got this letter, and I read it. I was so excited that if my heart got any bigger, it would have bust. I was so excited and had no one to talk to or tell. I took my Grades 10, 11, and 12 in different categories. I thought, "I am okay." Then my second youngest boy came in. I said, "You don't know how happy your mom is today!" "What happened? I showed him. None of my kids knew. Nobody knew because I didn't want anyone to know in case I failed. The school set me up for failure. He looked at me, and he said, "I am so proud of you!" Of course, he ran to all of his brothers and sisters, and said, "Look, at this!" He was very proud of me. I am self-educated, and now I am a Senator for the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, the longest serving senator. I have been a senator since 1993, and I am the only senator of that group left. I am a very strong Métis. If somebody would have said to me, "Nora you're going to travel and you're going to sit with Prime Ministers and the biggest people." I would have said, "Forget it!" I have dined with Prime Ministers and the Governor General of Canada. As a Métis, I've travelled and have done workshops in Albuquerque, New Mexico. When they ask me to speak and go to Aboriginal day, I always go. If they fly our flag, and play our national anthem, this is important to me. I remember one time at Indian Affairs in Ottawa. When I spoke there, there were over 107 of our Métis people that worked at Indian Affairs. After I spoke, they said, "Senator, we are so proud that we're Métis too." I said, "You have to tell them who you are as a people. You have to know and be proud of who you are. You have your people behind you now." They worked in a First Nation place. I was honoured that I was able to encourage them to be proud of themselves.

I wear traditional Métis clothing, and about two weeks ago or a month ago this lady, came up to me, and she said, "This First Nations chief came up to me and said do you

know Senator Cummings?” She said, “Yes, I know her.” He said, “I am so proud of her.” I don’t know this chief. I want to meet him. He said, “I look at the Métis, and they’re so unique when they go out. They so proudly wear their sashes, and you know they wear the symbol of the Métisism. Our chiefs wear suits. They should be wearing some cultural clothing when they go to conferences.” I thought, “Wow.” That’s going to sink in to our young people. I said, “I would like to meet him.” I’ve met a lot of great people in my lifetime. I presented Queen Elizabeth with a Métis sash. I gave George Jones a sash. I gave away sashes to a person from New Zealand. I have sashes all over, and I remember in Albuquerque, I was doing a workshop there. The Métis were always shoved in a little corner, and I said, “It doesn’t matter to me where we are.” I was only supposed to do two workshops. I did three workshops a day, and I took stuff with me in my suitcase. There was an elder from some country. I forget now, and he was so interested in our culture. I was looking around, and I said, “You know, we as Métis, when people come to us and visit, we’re so proud and honoured. We always give a gift.” I gave away the sash to this gentleman. He was so honoured that he wore this sash everywhere he went. He said when he went home that he would have to give it to his leader because he wasn’t the leader. He wanted to know my version of the sash, so I told him. It was a worldwide conference, and it was on for five days. I was very honoured that they took me there to show my Métis heritage, and when I travel, I always make sure people know who we are. I want to be known as a Métis. I want our people to be known as Métis. I want our stats up as Métis because that’s who we are. We have to teach our culture. It’s a gift, and you give your gift or blanket when people come visit. For the first time, they come to visit my home or me. I take something in my house, and I give it to them because it’s an honour for me to come into my home. I teach this to the young people, and I think we have to retain that culture, and our elders have to start teaching our young people to come to Batoche this year. Our elders are going to have stories taught in circles. I just come back from a national conference, and they’re all coming. The elders are going to come and share their stories because everybody is so unique. We’re also going to have animal calling. We’re also going to have BS stories because that’s part of the humour. I told them to bring any instruments that they can play for jamming. That’s what our plans are, and all the things are going to be done. Our youth are going to help us and record all this. We are hoping to do a booklet on it. So, I am excited about it because the excitement is there. When I talked to the elders when I was in Vancouver, I said, “Get your stories together. We’re all there. We all sat around. Of course, there are lots of stories there. Sometimes politics brings a lot of ugliness, and we need to let them vent, but we also need to let them know who we are and what we are doing. We have asked our leadership to come to participate with us.

6) What do you enjoy about being Métis?

I enjoy being able to go out and talk about who we are, where we come from, and how we lived. I want people to understand that we’re our own people. That we have our own distinct culture, a rich culture, and it will never be forgotten. I want to make sure that a legacy is left so our people will never have to go underground like they did in the early 30s, when they were afraid to be Métis. I want them to stand up and never let that happen to us again. That’s why I go out and talk about being Métis. People

probably think not again, but we have to. If we tell one or ten, we're going to get that message out, and that's why I like being Métis.

7) What has been the most challenging thing about being Métis?

It's challenging and frustrating for me when people call us Aboriginal without saying that we're Métis. It bothers me because I always say to them, "If I went out and said you were German, when you are a Russian would that be okay?." We all can identify who we are, but it seems that it's been for years that they have been taking our identity and are not really being sincere about whom we are. I think that's so important as a Métis. We are on the map, but it was a long time coming. We have to move that along. We have to continue to do that so people will recognize us as our own people with our own culture. If we don't do it, and if we lose that, our children are going to suffer in the next generation.

8) What is the most important thing that you want others to know about the Métis?

They need to know about our way of life, but they also have to know about our culture. A lot of people think that we just bake bannock, and play the fiddle, and we jig. It's ignorance on their part, and that's all they know about. I tell them from the north to the south and even in central areas that we vary even though we are Métis. The north is different in a lot of what we do, but so too is the centre and the south. In terms of our languages, people think we all speak Michif, but not everybody speaks Michif. Some speak Cree. My husband calls me Swampy Cree. I call him a "Bush Cree," and then there is the real Michif that my mother spoke. Bruce Flamont speaks the real Michif from the south, and he was talking to my mom and she looked at me and said, "What's he talking about?" It's so important that our people have to understand that we're one people, but because of the jurisdictions that we live in our country, there are differences, but we're one Métis people. That has to be told

9) If you were advising yourself as a Métis youth, knowing what you know now, what would you tell yourself in a sentence or two?

One thing I would tell myself is to make sure that I continue with an education, and to pursue my dreams. For Métis youth, I would say that whatever you choose to do, if its sports, going into the Army, being a carpenter or whatever role you want to play, pursue that dream. While growing up, I used to cook, bake, iron and wash. All these things have a uniqueness to them. Education is so important now because time has changed since I grew up. Education was one thing we never had the opportunity to pursue. You can be a lawyer or a doctor or whatever you want to because we have those skills. Our people, now that they are educated, are role models. I had a lot of role models in my life. Now I see good role models, and role models are very important. We need to continue to make sure that there are good role models and teachers in our community. I love youth and I love children. I work four days a week, four hours a day, and 16 hours a week. I work in a home with young mothers and their babies. I am 75 years of age and I am still going.