



# **GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE**

## **of Native Studies and Applied Research**

Interview of Elder Erma Taylor

Conducted by David Morin

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### **1. Could you please tell me your name and your home community?**

My name is Erma Taylor and when I was born, we lived on the Road Allowance in the Katepwa Valley.

### **2. Where were you born?**

I was actually born in Indian Head. This was before there was a real hospital there. It was an old house. I like to tell kids that I was born in the first half of the last century and when I was born my family lived on the road allowance in the Katepwa Valley. My grandfather, mother, aunts and uncles all worked for farmers in the area. We had lots of relatives that lived all in the same place.

### **3. Where did you grow up?**

I started on the road allowance, but we didn't stay there very long. I was about two or three when we moved to Fort Qu'Appelle. We had to do that because my grandfather and aunt developed tuberculosis and had to go to Fort San for treatment, and so for quite a few years we very often went back to visit people in the valley, and later on when they started drifting into towns, we would go visit them in Abernethy, Indian Head, Sintaluta, and Lebret. However, my grandfather was in the San for five years and my aunt for almost two years, and she actually lost a lung there in the San to TB. It didn't seem to stop her though; she worked for thirty years in the Grey Nuns hospital after that. My mother got a job in Fort Qu'Appelle in the Indian hospital actually. She worked there for a lot of years: in housekeeping and in the kitchen and my grandparents stayed home. My grandmother stayed home and was there for me when I got home from school and stuff like that which was great. We lived in a house that we the family built for ourselves.

### **4. Where have you lived most of your life?**

After I finished school in Fort Qu'Appelle, in 1968 or something like that, I moved to the big city of Regina, and I have been there off and on ever since. I went to the coast for a couple of years. I didn't go straight to Vancouver. I was in Abbotsford for a couple of years, but I absolutely couldn't handle those winters. It would rain for forty days and forty nights. I had to come home to the snow and the blue skies. Almost every single weekend, I go back to the valley or through it. My mom lives in Balcarres

in an integrated care centre, and so I am there all the time. I go to church in Lebret—it was built by my ancestors. I am forever going back home. I still call it [the valley] home.

**5. Who were/are your parents and grandparents? Where were they from?**

Okay, this will be a little long. My mom is Adeline Klyne. She married a Poitras later in her life. She was born in the municipality of Katepwa in 1925. She married Ed Poitras from Indian Head in the 1980s. Her parents were Toussaint Klyne and Sarah Desjarlais-Klyne. Grandpa Toussaint was born in File Hills in September 1903. His parents were Alfred Klein, born July 6, 1878, in Katepwa and Philomene Cardinal-Klyne born February 1885 in File Hills District. She died quite young and Alfred remarried, but had no other children. My grandma, Sarah Desjarlais-Klyne was born in 1904. Her father was Xavier Desjarlais who died when grandma was very young and he is buried St. Delphine Cemetery by Ituna. Her mother was Rose Cardinal-Desjarlais, born January 1879 in Lebret, and Rose remarried as well because her husband died early, but she had no children with her second husband. Her parents are Charles Cardinal and Josette Desmarais-Cardinal who was born around 1846.

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

Well family always comes first and that includes extended families, of course. Sometimes, they are not even related to you by blood, but it just works that way. My great grandma lived with us off and on when I was younger, and she passed away when I was 13 or so. Great grandma never ever spoke a word of English until she died. It was Michif all the way. Everyone in the family worked at something, even if they didn't get paid, or didn't get paid in cash. They mostly got paid in-kind. Mom first worked for farmers. When I was very young, I remember one particular time she went to work and took me with her. She was stooking and I got to play with the baby mice that I found under the stooks. Then I took them home in my pocket, and my grandmother just about ate me when I would pull them out to play with. She made me give them to the cat. But afterwards, when my grandpa got TB, and we had to move to Fort Qu'Appelle, she still went out and worked those kinds of things. Then she quit the farmer job when grandpa went to the [Fort] San, of course. When we lived fulltime at the fort, she got a job at the Indian hospital in Fort Qu'Appelle and worked there for many, many years. Before that, like all Michifs in the family, you did what you had to do. My grandmother never had a social insurance card, but that didn't mean she didn't work. She made the most beautiful, hooked rugs. We're related to Margaret [Harrison, née Racette] and that family over there. We come from kind of the same place. Yeah, a lot of the women made hooked rugs and sold them. Very rarely would grandma use a pattern. She could just draw a deer freehand and rug hook it; it was absolutely gorgeous. She washed clothes for the meat market with all their bloody white aprons and what not in a wash tub. She used a scrub board, and they were sparkling white when they were returned. We used to clean ducks and geese as well for hunters from the States. Sometimes we plucked and gutted and washed and

waxed up to 200 ducks. My job was taking out the pin feathers after the waxing and I hated that job, and to this day I hate ducks. All this plucking had to be done outside, and my grandpa did all the plucking. He had to separate the feathers and all that kind of stuff. The good part was that we would get feather ticks and pillows, and all kinds of cushions and things from all of these feathers. The bad part was you got bitten by fleas all the time and the cheap hunters from the States instead of saying, "Here's 20 or 50 bucks for all your work," they'd say, "Take 50 ducks." It is funny now, but at the time, I didn't realize what was happening because I never had to worry about survival. Anyway, because of all of that stuff, I got a very strong work ethic from my family. I feel pride. I take pride in everything that I do as I job. I think that it is in my blood to give back more than 100 %.

#### **7. What do you enjoy about being Métis?**

This is one of the shortest answers, but it just means the most. I love the sense of belonging, closeness of family, shared interest in culture and language. I like that you can throw out a nickname, and everyone knows who it is and they laugh. Michifs like to laugh, even at themselves, but they also show respect where it's due and I really like that.

#### **8. What has been the most challenging thing about being Métis?**

There has only been one challenging thing that I can think of in my whole life. Something that I called challenging, I didn't even know that it was the way it was. When I first started school, first of all I didn't speak English very well. I didn't start school till I was about 7, and then I had to start because we were living in Fort Qu'Appelle and there was a school. Somewhere in the mid-40s the government decided, "Oh yeah half-breeds can be educated." So, then they sent out truant officers to come and get you, haul you out from under the bed. But because I was the very first one in my family to ever go to school... Oh, that's a lie. My aunt Yvonne, my mom's youngest sibling, went to grade three, and then she had to go to work for farmers as well. She did learn to read and write, but that's about it. She was long gone before I was growing up and going to school. I had no concept of school. It scared the hell out of me. So, when I started school, there was nobody to help me with my homework, to help me make choices. However, I did get a tutor. I learned how to speak English really well. I learned my grammar. I learned where to put the commas and the periods. I learned and excelled at all those kinds of things, really, really well. They came to the house and said, "You have speak English at home because this girl has to speak English at school and for the rest of her life." And so, over the years, I lost the ability to speak the language [Michif]. I still understand all of it. I can speak if it's a word or three at a time but putting together whole sentences is challenging for me in Michif, but I can do it on paper, and then I can read it, and I am good. But my tongue gets tangled when I spit it all out at one time. The most challenging part for me was that there was no one who could read or write in my immediate family. In fact, one of the funny little stories, because nobody could read or write, no one could spell their names or my name. And so, one of the neighbour kids— a Michif as well, a Blondeau girl—was teaching me when I was 6 or 7 to write my name because I really wanted to do it. So, she taught me how to write my name, and I used it my entire life,

and I am over 60 now, and I went to get my birth certificate to see if I'd need it one of these bloody days. She spelled my name wrong. All these years, nobody ever corrected it because nobody ever knew, nobody ever cared. My name has been spelled wrong for over 60 years, and because nobody at home could read or write. Funny. My mother was taught the alphabet by some farmer that she worked for, a lady. The lady actually wanted to keep me when mom had me. Apparently, I was counting chickens in the front yard, and she said, "Adeline, why don't you just leave her here?" Mom said, "No!" And so she taught herself to read, little-by-little, by looking at comic books of all bloody things. You can see the pictures and guess what the words are and once you know the alphabet. That's what she said. So, I could write her little notes, if I printed them like a comic. I couldn't write them, of course, and they were simple words. The saying is, "You can't stick a half-breed, right?" They'll learn how to do it, you know? It's a survival thing

**9. What is the most important thing that you want others to know about the Métis?**

There are just so many. I was having a hard time trying to figure that out. I think if they knew the history; a lot of it is tucked in there. How we were treated. How we lost our land bases before we actually even got settled into them. How we were not allowed to live in the same area, even though we were very familial. How we were chased away from here and there and split up into groups. If they knew the history, it would all come back to you. How the government issued scrip, and how it was set up to fail. They should know that we are a unique people, and they need to understand that we were born here. This is where we come from. We can't go to any other country and learn our heritage. So, they should come here and learn our heritage. However, we need to have it out there first in a way that's learnable. We have our own language and values, and contributions. We have made to this country. Contributions include things like the Lebret church, for instance. It was built by Métis, not only my relatives. A lot of Métis people in the southern part of the province built all the grain elevators, and all around in the three Prairie Provinces. It got them out of Abernethy, Saskatchewan or Lebret, Saskatchewan, or whatever. They never would have had an opportunity to go out and see things and become master carpenters. Most of them couldn't read or write, and then at the end, they tore them all down. It's just like a whole lifetime of work there is gone. It's just sad.

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

I don't know how to say that in a few words of wisdom. I am not that wise, I don't think. For sure, I would say, "Don't forget your language, practice it everyday. Teach your children." I think that's the biggest one. My actual philosophy in life is: be proud, laugh everyday, and don't forget where you come from. This is how we say it in Michif: "Kishchitaymow pahpi too lee jour ekwa kiya waneehka tande kaa oohtootayen."