

## Road Allowance Interview, Norma Jean Byrd

Conducted by Scott Duffee

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**SD: Can you please tell me your name and your home community?**

NB: My name is Norma Jean Byrd, initially Dubray. Right now, I live in Regina, but we're talking about a Métis community that I lived in, right?

**SD: Where did you grow up?**

NB: I grew up in St. Louis, Saskatchewan.

**SD: Was that a road allowance community that you grew up in?**

NB: Yes, I say it was a road allowance because we didn't own the land. My father and our family were just like squatters. We lived in a little shack compared to the big homes now.

**SD: Who were your parents and grandparents?**

NB: My parents were Lorna, they called her Lorena Gervais and Ernest Dubray, and he went by Bud.

**SD: What were your grandparents' names?**

NB: My grandfather was Fredrick Gervais, and my grandmother's name was Virginie Ouellette.

**SD: That was from your mom's side?**

NB: Yes, my mom's side.

**SD: How about your grandparents from your dad's side**

NB: On my dad's side was Antoine Dubray (Dubrail) and Louisa Martin.

**SD: Did your parents or grandparents always live in St. Louis?**

NB: My grandparents on my Dubray side did. On my Gervais side, my mom's side, they moved into St. Louis later on.

**SD: Did your parents always live there?**

NB: My parents, no. When we were in like high school, me and my twin brother and my siblings, we moved to Meadow Lake.

**SD: So, you lived in St. Louis until you were 13 or 14?**

NB: Yes, about 15. I went to the day school. It was like a convent.

**SD: What Métis families lived in and around that area?**

NB: Lots of Métis families, but we did have other families that lived there also.

**SD: Were there any other families that were squatting like you guys were?**

NB: Probably, I wouldn't know that though, because we were fairly young, but I know that we squatted for sure because my grandfather had that land. I don't know whether he squatted. He must have owned the land later on, but I think he lived right along the South Saskatchewan River.

**SD: Did any non-Métis live around that area?**

NB: Yes, they did. There were not many, but there were a few families.

**SD: Did you live in any other road allowance communities?**

NB: No, we didn't because when we moved to Meadow Lake, my dad rented a property. We came from a squatters' home site to live in a rented property.

**SD: So, you're not sure if any other families were squatting, or if they owned their own property in that area?**

NB: No, there could've been some squatters, but I wouldn't know. A guy didn't go around asking them, but I'm sure there were.

**SD: Were there other families with kids your age that seemed to be living in the same sort of living circumstances, living in small shacks?**

NB: Oh yes, yes.

**SD: Were there some kids living how you guys did and other kids in fancier houses?**

NB: Yes, the elevator agents. There were quite a few elevators in St. Louis at one time, and they were working in the elevators. It seemed to be that the white families had come to our community, and they lived in bigger properties.

**SD: How did the other Métis families live?**

NB: Same way, some of them had to hunt. We grew great big gardens. I don't ever remember welfare in those days. We grew great big gardens, and my dad hunted and trapped so we could eat. And my brothers, even as they grew up, they hunted rabbits and things like that, and prairie chickens.

**SD: How did your family and other Métis families make a living?**

NB: Later on, my dad became a mechanic. I don't know how. I think he was sort of gifted that way. He could fix vehicles just by listening to the sound of them, and he could tell what was wrong with them. You call people gifted in some areas, and he was sort of gifted in that area.

**SD: What kind of resources did your dad harvest, animals and plants?**

NB: Well, of course, a garden. I mean big gardens. I can remember our garden looked like today's big market gardens.

**SD: Do you think there is a Métis style of garden that's unique to other styles?**

NB: Yeah, I'm sure.

**SD: Could you describe it? How that would be?**

NB: They would plant corn, and all of our gardens really seemed to grow good. I remember being a small child and going and picking weeds out of the garden. It seemed to just really flourish. I can remember taking a carrot out of the earth and it was so big. My grandfather, the one that lived to be 101 years old, he really knew how to garden.

**SD: What was his name?**

NB: Antoine Dubray.

**SD: Nothing comes to mind of any particular tricks that the Métis did with their gardens?**

NB: Well, I think he knew how to grow a garden for sure. And hill the potatoes. I don't even know if they know how to plant a garden today, hilling the potatoes and all those kinds of things.

**SD: So, gardens were a pretty main source of food?**

NB: Yes, it was a main source. My grandfather was very innovative because we lived along the river, and he dug out the riverbank, and he shored it up with great big planks. Then he put a big door on this little building that was on the riverbank. Then in the winter he went and got ice from the river. He cut ice out of the river and put it in that shed. I call it a garden shed. Then he'd put straw on top of it, and then it kept our food. I didn't know what a refrigerator was 'till I was 18 years old.

**SD: That probably kept food cold in spring and summer.**

NB: Yes, it did. Then in the winter, we'd have a great big barrel, you could buy gas barrels, or I don't know how they got these gas barrels, but they were big barrels. They were cleaned out, and then we would store our food in there for the winter, like any meat my dad got like deer or moose. Then he'd butcher it and then we would store it.

**SD: What kind of animals did your dad harvest?**

NB: Deer, ducks, and rabbits, all those kinds of things. Sometimes, he would go hunting for elk with some other people, and then he'd go fish. He used to go and fish, and he used to go and fish goldeyes out of the river. Today, they wouldn't eat them, but in our day that's what we ate. We'd make a line with a green cord, and then we'd put those slanted hooks on there. It hooked my hands and I got some scars. You put a stone on the end a twirl it around your head and let it go and it would go in the river.

**SD: So, it was kind of a net?**

NB: Well, no, it wasn't a net. It was just a line with a whole bunch of hooks. Too many hooks; sometimes we thought if we had more hooks, we—

**SD: Did you put bait on the hooks?**

NB: Yes, grasshoppers. We would go and pick grasshoppers.

**SD: And you caught goldeyes?**

NB: Yes, yes.

**SD: Was there a certain time of year for that kind of fishing?**

NB: Yes, on the weekends because we were not going to school then.

**SD: Were any animals harvested in a certain season?**

NB: Yes, of course, my dad know exactly when to go and hunt. We wouldn't hunt otherwise.

**SD: What about any plants or berries?**

NB: Oh yeah, we picked all kinds of berries. I know what high-bush cranberries look like pin cherries, chokecherries. Yes, we did a lot of that. Gooseberries, wild

gooseberries, and filberts, you know those hazelnuts. We picked those. I know all those kinds of things.

**SD: Saskatoons?**

NB: Saskatoons, yeah Saskatoons.

**SD: But no blueberries?**

NB: No, but when my dad moved north, we'd pick blueberries. I know low-bush cranberries, high-bush cranberries, blueberries, all those things.

**SD: What kind of traditional medicines did you use?**

NB: If you had a cold, my grandmother was a medicine woman. My mother told me that when I was a little girl, I got the croup. You know what that is? You can't breathe and it's almost like pneumonia. Grandma mixed a poultice of mustard and lard and things like that, and she put it on me. I was okay after that.

**SD: Oh, wow so your grandma was good at that?**

NB: Yeah, like a medicine woman?

**SD: What was her name?**

NB: Louisa Martin.

**SD: That's her maiden name, Martin?**

NB: Yes.

**SD: So, her married name was Dubray?**

NB: Dubray, yeah.

**SD: Were there any other medicine women in your family or community?**

NB: Well, I really study medicines now, but my mother really knew seneca root and rat root, and things like that.

**SD: So, your mom harvested those things?**

NB: A little bit, yeah.

**SD: What did she do with the seneca root?**

NB: Seneca root? My maternal grandmother used to make tea, and also, I think they ground it. I don't what they really used it for, but I remember my mom talking about seneca root and rat root. Rat root was good for colds or sore throats.

**SD: Do you have anyone in your family that did beadwork or embroidered moccasins?**

NB: My grandmother on my mom's side. She would do that work.

**SD: What was her name?**

NB: Her name was Antoinette Ouellette.

**SD: Oh, that was your grandmother's name?**

NB: Yes, and then she married my grandfather Gervais.

**SD: So, she did the beadwork?**

NB: Yes, she did and she was a sewer, too. She sewed things.

**SD: Did she embroider or anything?**

NB: Yes, she did all that kind of work.

**SD: Do you know what happen to any of those items?**

NB: I don't know where anything went.

**SD: Who did she make bead work for usually?**

NB: I think to sell. People used to make things to sell.

**SD: Did her husband wear any beadwork?**

NB: Grandpa, I don't remember. I know he wore leather-like vests, but I can't remember if there was beadwork on it or not.

**SD: Were they homemade vests?**

NB: Yes, my grandmother sewed.

**SD: Did your grandmother ever tan the hides?**

NB: No, she didn't. She probably got them from somebody else.

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

NB: Well, when you talk about celebrating, we lived in poverty. I don't even remember getting anything for Christmas. Then as I grew a little bit older, probably seven, I can remember the first time I ever got a doll. I can remember that. I don't know where we got it from or where. I can't remember getting a whole bunch of things.

**SD: Was there anything that your family did on Christmas or New Year's Eve to celebrate?**

NB: No, I only remember after the war when my uncle came back. They had a big celebration for him. I remember that a little bit 'cause we were all young, and we were all sent to bed upstairs. We had a loft at that time. We lived with my grandparents then.

**SD: How long did you live with your grandparents for?**

NB: Probably 'till I was 9 years old because we then moved. My grandparents moved in the road allowance, and then after that, we moved there and then they built this little shack. This was all in the same yard, you just had to run across and see are grandparents.

**SD: So, nothing stands out for Christmas and New Year's?**

NB: No, nothing.

**SD: Does anyone or did anyone in your family speak Michif?**

NB: Michif? Ah well lots of French mixed with some Cree.

**SD: So, it was more of a French community?**

NB: Yeah, well St. Louis was mostly French. When we went to school, we had to take French, too because there were French students. Do I speak French?

**SD: Do you speak Michif?**

NB: Michif? No, but I speak French because we needed to know French. I can read French really well. Not so much talking anymore, because you lose your language when you don't talk it lots.

**SD: Do you know any traditional Métis stories or songs that you can remember?**

NB: I remember my grandfather telling some because we had a graveyard site just across and down from where we lived. He would tell us, "Don't you go out late at night. When it gets dark, you need to come home because the people will not like you around that gravesite." We used to go around walking down the road. He would say that we shouldn't go. We shouldn't go out after dark. "Don't break branches of the trees." "Don't break any of the trees because they are living things." He would tell us those kinds of things. "Don't spit on Mother Earth because Mother Earth is living." You know how lots of young people like to spit now? He'd tell us some things like that because he really loved Mother Earth. He knew that's where his food came from, too

**SD: Interesting. Which grandfather was that?**

NB: That was Antoine Dubray. He was a big man, big hands. Grandpa shingled roofs until he was 87 years old.

SD: Jeez.

NB: Yeah, he was a very strong man.

**SD: And that's who lived beside you guys?**

NB: Yes.

**SD: And your other set of grandparents lived in the area too?**

NB: Yes, later on they lived quite a ways down from where we lived. We had to go all the way down and almost all the way to the church or where we went to school to be near where our other grandparents lived.

**SD: They had just moved there?**

NB: Yeah, they moved from the reserve and from the Duck Lake area.

**SD: What were your best memories about living in that community?**

NB: My best memories: probably because we lived close to the river, we used to swim. We used to drink that water. Today, we have a lot of technological things. Well in those days, we didn't have that, so we would go and explore. We did funny things. We would go and explore in the bush and would see what we could find. We even picked up little lynx kittens one time.

**SD: Really?**

NB: Yes, there were lynx kittens. There was a nest and there were lynx kittens. So, me and my twin brother and my next brother to us, we had gone out searching, and there were three little kittens in there. We didn't even have to argue about who was going to hold them. They were just so cute. I can always remember them. Anyway, we each took one of those little kittens. We were across the road, and we were in the bush way down across the road when we found these little kittens. As we came up on the highway, my mom happened to come out of the house, and she saw us with these kittens. I could hear my mom just even today: "Get those kittens back on the other side of the road and you get here all quick," she said. "If that lynx comes after

you, you guys will be dead." So, we just ran back and put them on the side of the road, and we started to run towards the house. I could hear this pitter patter coming behind us. Oh boy I didn't even turn around me and my twin brother got into the house, but my little brother didn't. He pulled the screen door back against himself like this and that lynx was at him. Good thing he was smart enough and my mom went out with a big broom and hit that lynx, and it ran off.

**SD: So, you just barely made it?**

NB: You bet, yes. I can still hear my mother screaming at us. She was in a panic.

**SD: And just in time?**

NB: Yeah, just in time. We never worried about any of those things

**SD: I like that story. Are there any bad memories about living there that you would like to share?**

NB: Yeah, bad memories.

**SD: There were some tough times?**

NB: Yes.

**SD: Does anything come to mind that you feel comfortable sharing?**

NB: Ha ha. Well, we had some perpetrators in that community.

**SD: So, safety was an issue sometimes?**

NB: Mhmm.

**SD: Just for kids mostly? For younger girls?**

NB: Yeah, for young women.

**SD: Well, that's too bad. How were the Métis treated in your community?**

NB: Well, some of the white people stayed with their own, and the Métis sort of did, too. There were a lot of Métis then, but I never ever saw them have any kind of functions together. They all stayed on their side of the fence.

**SD: Did your family encounter racism?**

NB: Oh yeah.

**SD: Really?**

NB: Yeah.

**SD: Do you have specific examples?**

NB: Yeah, I do. When we went to school, I got the strap because this young girl, the Wheat Pool agent's daughter, said something like, "You're a stinking dirty Indian!" So, I got mad at her, and I wanted to beat her up. So, I pushed her down a hill. It was in the wintertime, and I gave her a shovel, and she went flying down the hill. Of course, when she went back to school, she probably told the teacher. In those days, they give you the strap.

**SD: So, you got the strap?**

NB: Yeah.

**SD: Any other examples come to your mind?**

NB: Well, just the separation.

**SD:** And you found that in the school as well there was big divide?

NB: Oh, for sure.

**SD:** Was the treatment different?

NB: Yeah, it was different. You felt it.

**SD:** Did people eventually leave that road allowance community?

NB: Yes.

**SD:** When did that start to happen?

NB: I don't know because when we left there, it was different. There were more changes in that time. I'm sure my grandfather saw a lot of changes, too, but I saw a lot of changes, even when we used to go back and visit my grandfather who was still there. It started to change after that.

**SD:** So, do you know why people eventually left?

NB: Mostly for work. I know my dad left for work.

**SD:** What kind of work did in Meadow Lake?

NB: A mechanic, he worked in a garage.

**SD:** Do you know where your grandparents were originally from? Were they originally from this area?

NB: Yes, they were.

**SD:** Was your family involved in the 1885 Resistance?

NB: Well, my grandfather was 8 years old, and he used to talk about it with us.

**SD:** And that was Dubray?

NB: Yes.

**SD:** What did he tell you about it?

NB: Well, he talked about Gabriel Dumont and Riel. I'm assuming he must've gotten some information because he kept saying, "Gabriel Dumont was a good person." "If Riel would have listened to him. Dumont was more of the brains." He'd say those things.

**SD:** Do you remember anything else that he shared about that time?

NB: No, he just seemed proud because he was 8 years old. He knew the resistance was there and that he could be called.

**SD:** And he was there?

NB: Yeah.

**SD:** So, do you know if his parents were involved in it some how?

NB: I don't know.

**SD:** That would have been your great-grandparents, who would have been adults?

NB: Yes, and I don't know.

**SD:** How about the other set of grandparents or great-grandparents?

NB: I don't know either. My grandma, Virginie Ouellette, was a cousin to Gabriel Dumont.

**SD:** But no stories passed on?

NB: No.

**SD: Some families were okay with talking about it?**

NB: Yeah, that's it.

**SD: Do you know what happened to your family after the 1885 Resistance?**

NB: No, I don't.

**SD: They stayed in the area?**

NB: Yeah, they stayed in the area. They never travelled very much because people were poor then. We never thought about being poor like nine people living in that little two-room shack.

**SD: So, who were the nine people?**

NB: My mom and dad, and then seven siblings, two sets of twins. I'm a twin with a brother, and my only sister was a twin with a brother.

**SD: Did or does anyone in your family serve in the military?**

NB: Yes, some of my uncles served in the military.

**SD: Do you know if they served during wartime?**

NB: Yes, my uncle George was in the front lines, and then he came back and they had a big celebration for the people who were in wartime. I can always remember that. I was little, but I remember when they came back because I would have been four or five-years-old. When they came, they had a big celebration, and my uncle George had fought in the front lines.

**SD: World War?**

NB: World War II and then came back and he got in a car accident.

**SD: And he died from it?**

NB: Yes.

**SD: How long after he had been back?**

NB: Not very long because we were quite young. I can remember my mom crying and then saying, "My brother. My brother."

**SD: Anyone else serve in World War II or in the Korean War?**

NB: Nope

**SD: Did anyone else serve in the military when the war wasn't going on?**

NB: Yeah, some of the cousins maybe, but I'm not sure.

**SD: Was anyone in your family involved in the Métis Society?**

NB: I think that all of us were a little bit active, especially if some of the Métis people got together.

**SD: Do you remember any Métis gatherings?**

NB: Yeah, there were a lot of Métis gatherings. There was some fiddle playing sometimes.

**SD: What would be an occasion that a fiddle would come out for?**

NB: When they came back from war. I can remember them playing the fiddle and all those kinds of things, some guitars.

**SD: Any other times the fiddle came out?**

NB: Well quite often.

**SD: It did, okay? Who was the fiddle player do you remember?**

NB: Some of my uncles played the fiddle or tapped their feet.

**SD: Any jigging?**

NB: Oh yeah. They used to jig. My mom liked jigging. I jig a little bit.

**SD: Those types of gatherings would just happen once in awhile?**

NB: Yeah.

**SD: Do you have anything else you would like to share about how you grew up or any other memories or experiences that come to mind?**

NB: Swimming: we swam in the river lots. Now, they call it dangerous. It's not the same either. The rivers seem like they are mad now. They seem to be swifter and dirtier. Then we had beaver dam, where we used to swim, just down from our place. Then we had a beaver dam, and we used to swim up there in a little creek that would run through. We never felt any danger.

**SD: Sounds like a nice spot.**

NB: Yeah.

**SD: And that was just out side of St. Louis or a few miles away?**

NB: Just right in St. Louis. You know St. Louis has the biggest bridge?

**SD: Yeah. So, you were near that bridge then?**

NB: Yes.

**SD: So, the town was just across the road from where your house was?**

NB: Okay, the bridge was this way, and we lived way up here. You could see the bridge if you went to the crest. Later on, they built a little alcove off the bank because the river bank was really steep. I remember we had little trails down there, and we had little branches that we could hold ourselves on to otherwise we slid down.

**SD: Who was your closest neighbour that wasn't Métis? Who were close was your closet neighbour?**

NB: Phaneufs.

**SD: Were they like half a mile away or?**

NB: No, they were probably from the corner of this building here.

**SD: So, the houses were that close together?**

NB: Well, they lived across the road.

**SD: Across the road right in the town?**

NB: Well, not in town. It was outside the town. The town was down over here. There are big hills there. If you ever go to St. Louis, cross that bridge and then you go up the hill to go to Wakaw, Domremy, Hoey and then you know you turn off and go the other way to Melfort. That way had a roadway to Birch Hills. That's where we lived.

**SD: If you were to walk to St. Louis to the general store, how long would it take you?**

NB: Quite awhile, if you walked fast, probably half an hour. I know because when we had to walk to school, the wind came up from the river.

**SD: Were you on the other side of the river from town?**

NB: Yeah, the town was here. The bridge cuts through the town like this to go to Prince Albert, and then we go up to Hoey this way. Then you go to Birch Hills and Melfort this way. We lived right along the river. The river was just down there; you know where the big bridge is.

**SD: In the town of St. Louis were there as many French Canadians as there was French Métis'?**

NB: Yes.

**SD: It was both?**

NB: Yeah, both of them. I don't know because they mostly spoke French. French Michif: some of them had both languages. See my grandfather Gervais he lived on Beardy's Okemasis Reserve and worked with the chief there. He could converse in Cree.

**SD: What did he do when he lived on reserve?**

NB: I don't know. He helped the chief with some things. I don't know what he worked on, but I can remember my mother saying, "When I lived on the reserve, I was scared of the chief."

**SD: If anything else comes to mind let me know. We will stop the interview.**