Road Allowance Interview of Oliver Calette with his son Mark Calette

Conducted by Darren Prefontaine
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DP: Can you please tell me your name and home community Oliver?
OC: My home community back then? There was so many. One was Glaslyn. Some were north of Glaslyn, not too far, just maybe fifteen, twenty miles north. One was on Jack Pine Road. That was a road allowance and a few of them were north of there, four or five miles north. But they are all close to the Number 4 Highway.
DP: Did they have any specific names?
OC: No, not really.
DP: What Métis families lived in these communities?
OC: Aunts and uncles. Some were Trottiers: Uncle Harry, Uncle Dave, Uncle Ed, Uncle Oliver, and a lot of cousins.
MC: Carons at all?
OC: Yes, Carons. Émile Caron, and my Aunt Lucie.
DP: These families all had connections originally to Batoche? Carons and Trottiers?
MC: Round Prairie.
DP: So, there were a lot of Round Prairie families?
MC: Yes
DP: Did any non-Métis live in these communities or just Michif people?
OC: They were a little mixed, my grandfather was Irish, and my grandma was Métis, and so was my dad.
DP: So sometimes First Nations and white people would intermarry with the Métis and live in these communities?
OC: Up in that country there were a lot of Ukrainian people, they were farmers. There were some Irish people.
DP: So, they intermarried with the Métis?
OC: No, they never. They were neighbours, and we were all almost like one family.
DP: So, the relations were generally good between all the people?
OC: Yes, very good.
MC: Did you have any connections with Ahtahkakoop? With Sasakamoose, or any of them?
OC: Not up there, no.
DP: Who were your parents and grandparents, and where were they from?
OC: They said that they came across the US Border. Now my grandmother, before she married my grandfather, she was a Trottier. She was married to a Trottier. They were up across the border and came back in through Val Marie and that area there and then moved back up here. I remember my grandpa telling me they came across

the river here [Saskatoon] when the steal bridge had planks on it, because they drove the horses and wagons across on the bridge, and the cows and the horses swam across the river.

DP: Would that be 1906, 1907?

OC: I really don't know when that was built, but I remember him telling me that.

MC: It would probably relate back to that part in "Gabriel's Children," where they were coming back from being exiled down in the States.

DP: So, they would be related to Patrice Trottier down in the Val Marie area?

MC: They're all the same. Our family took census with them in a place called Eagle Quill Lake or Eagle Quill Creek, somewhere around Swift Current in the last recorded census.

DP: So, you and your dad could be descended from Patrice's brother or something like that?

MC: Well, we know that it was Antoine Trottier. He would be dad's great-grandfather and then his grandfather was André Trottier. Those were all Round Prairie people. Antoine isn't buried here; he's buried in the States. There is interesting information if you read his book about that.

DP: Did they always live in the Road Allowance community here when they came to Canada? Did they move around a lot?

OC: They moved around a lot. I remember my grandpa worked off and on for the Department of Highways. I know myself we worked in the bush country, and we worked in the saw mills. I can remember being around the saw mill when I was just a little boy.

DP: The Trottiers were more of the southern Métis. Were there a lot of intermarriages with the southern Métis and the northern Métis? Or were they southern Métis families? I say that because a lot of the families from Beauval and other places went down to the Green Lake area and intermarried. I'm wondering if in your part of Saskatchewan, northern Métis and southern Métis intermarried?

MC: Highway 4 is the linkage to the States and back.

OC: Yes, it goes right from Green Lake right through to the border.

MC: Right down to Val Marie, and then it scattered them all the way across through Biggar, Battleford, and keep going north.

DP: It was mainly southern Métis that inched northward?

MC: Yes, but they were all from Round Prairie.

DP: So, they dispersed from Round Prairie, into the States, and then made their way north into Canada along Highway 4?

MC: Yes, I actually have a letter from his [Oliver's] great-grandfather. It's dated in 1922, I believe, maybe earlier. I have a copy of it, and it talks about their issues in having to go to the States because of the 1885 issues, because the Trottiers were directly involved in what happened up at Fish Creek /Tourond's Coulee. They've went

to the States, and now he was requesting his land back at Round Prairie. But they were in the Swift Current area, and they were taking census down there. They were living with their relatives down at Val Marie. From there, there was an exodus up north; it just kept going up Highway 4. His mother was born in Meadow Lake.

DP: It's a lot like the old cart trail from Swift Current and worked its way up to North Battleford. Is it sort of like that?

MC: Yes, that's exactly it.

OC: Well, I remember when I was a little boy, we usually lived fairly close to the highway, because sometimes we would catch the bus into town. That highway, Number 4 Highway, back in those days was just like an old grid road. It was gravel, and it wasn't very wide, so you know it's come a long way since then.

DP: It could have been the old cart trail for all that we know.

OC: When we travelled, we travelled with grandma and grandpa. We always had just a team of horses with a wagon. I remember as a little boy I sat on that pole at the back of the wagon, it's a pole that goes from the front right through the back axel, and you could pull that apart, and I sat on that. That was my sort of my chair, I guess.

DP: So, they didn't call that a "democrat"? It was just a wagon?

OC: I don't know what they called it, just a wagon, I guess. You know like four wooden wheels and a team of horses?

DP: What sort of resources did your family harvest, I mean like Saskatoons or things like that?

OC: Most of our stuff, like probably 100 percent of our fruit was picked. As children, we picked our fruit like blueberries, cranberries, Saskatoon berries, raspberries, strawberries, and Grandma made jam with that and fruit. Our meat, most of it you know was deer meat, moose meat, and our delicacy meat was chicken. We had chickens in the summer time. We'd slaughter them in the fall and Grandma would can the chickens.

DP: Did you guys harvest duck eggs and that sort of thing?

OC: Not us, other people did.

MC: What about fish and stuff like that?

OC: No, we weren't much into canning fish. We ate fish.

MC: Any other wild meat?

OC: The prairie chickens up there we call them spruce grouse. They were the same, but they tasted a little different, but you know they were the same thing. We also ate ducks, and geese.

DP: You saved all the feathers from the ducks and geese?

OC: Not all of them. Grandma made pillows with some of them.

DP: How did your family and other Métis families in Road Allowance communities make their living?

OC: Like I said, my grandpa worked part-time for the Department of Highways. Other than that, we worked in the bush. We cut down trees, cut them up, and made them into fence posts. The bigger ones were made into logs, and they were taken to the saw mill and were cut up and made into lumber. People would come and pick up their lumber in their trucks. My uncle had an old truck, and he would haul some wood into town. I know a lot of my uncles would cut posts and would then just go peddle them to farmers. Out in this area here, and out toward Kindersley and Rosetown, all those farmers out there. They'd buy fence posts, and that's how we basically made our living. Later on, we done the same thing; the only thing is that they built a pulp mill. Actually, that pulp mill is still there. Its "Lobie's and that's where all the posts, and lumber went to.

DP: How did women in the community make a living?

OC: They just looked after their families, and they done all the cooking.

DP: So, they didn't do laundry or anything for other people?

OC: No, we just did it for ourselves. Our laundry, I can remember washing the clothes with an old washboard. Then as years went by, we finally got up and had one of those little "Hoover" washers, and that was a big deal.

DP: Did your kohkum make her own soap?

OC: Oh definitely. She made her own soap, and made her own butter, and ice cream.

DP: What did she use for soap, lye or whatever, fat she could find?

OC: I couldn't remember, I don't know. It worked. I think we even brushed our teeth with that.

MC: Didn't she make her own medicines to?

OC: Oh yes, herbs.

DP: So, she was good at making that?

OC: She was very good at that.

DP: What sort of medicines did she make?

OC: Seneca root, and all different—probably 4 or 5 different types of roots, and leaves and herbs.

MC: Tree bark?

OC: Could be. Some things came up from underneath the moss I remember, trees.

DP: She looked after everyone in the family?

OC: Yes.

DP: Did she serve that role in the community or did every mother and grandmother kind of do that?

OC: Yes, she did pretty well her share, and if there was anybody else, it was sold or bought from Watkins. I think they used to come around probably two or three times a year.

MC: Didn't she cure somebody of gangrene though?

OC: Yes, a fellow by the name of Lavallée. They were going to amputate his leg in the hospital at North Battleford. She worked on him after he came home, and she saved his leg. Also, her finger, gangrene had set into her finger, and they were going to amputate her finger in the North Battleford Hospital. And she went home, and fixed it with her herbs, but she still lost part of it. She saved her nail, but part of her finger was gone already. She was a little bit late on that one.

DP: What did she use?

OC: I couldn't tell you.

DP: Was she a midwife at all?

OC: How do you mean?

DP: Did she deliver babies?

OC: Oh yes, she had done it a few times. Not that often, but I remember someone saying that she'd done it a few times. But a cook, a very good cook, that's all she done.

DP: What sorts of stuff did she make you guys?

OC: Well, the bullets, they were like meatballs. Both grandma and grandpa cooked. That's all she did was cook. Because our cousins, our house was always full. There were 10 or 15 people in our house all the time. She just cooked non-stop. She always had her hairnet on and her apron. Pies, she made her cinnamon buns, bread.

DP: How were the Métis treated in your community? Did your family encounter racism from the larger community?

OC: No

DP: No, they didn't face much racism?

OC: No, because back there, there is a reserve not too far from where we were. Métis people and Native people were quite common it that area because, I would say, probably half of the population were Métis and Native combined together. And you know like Ukrainian people. We all got along because we all worked together. We all needed one another.

DP: Well, you would have to say Ukrainians weren't exactly on the top of the hierarchy either.

OC: Well, no but…

DP: So, they would face discrimination, not to say they would, but less likely to discriminate than say like English?

MC: You maybe faced more of that when you started working for farmers, maybe more towards the west, like in Brock, Kindersley, and Rosetown?

OC: I never had much problem with that, but I heard of other people that were being discriminated against.

MC: Well, that one farmer didn't pay you.

OC: Well, that one guy was actually my uncle. I worked for him for a whole summer and I was supposed to get a car at the end of the year. I never got it somebody else got it.

DP: So, you had no memory of any sort of racism?

MC: People didn't treat you different? I find that hard to believe?

OC: Well maybe some of the other people they did. See I left home when I was young. I was not even 15 yet. I headed and came in this direction, and I worked for farmers, and I was knocking on doors trying to get a job. My goal in life was to work hard, and buy myself a car and some nice clothes, and just kind of be somebody, I guess.

DP: You went to a public school?

OC: Our school in Glaslyn was an elementary and high school, both in the same building.

DP: Mostly Métis kids with some Ukrainian?

OC: Yes, but I didn't get much schooling. I went in the front door and out the back basically.

DP: That was probably pretty common though with young Métis men of that period. They weren't really encouraged, because they had to go and make a living for their families?

OC: When we went to school, I remember after school, at 3:30 when we were let out, and we went and picked rocks in the farmer's field for 25 cents a day. We worked for the rest of the day, until 8:30 at night. That was for our spending money. But 15 cents back then, you went to the show for 15 cents, and a bottle of pop was 7 cents, so you didn't need a whole lot of money.

DP: When did people leave your road allowance community, what was the last road allowance community that you lived in?

OC: They're still up there.

DP: Now do they have their title to their homes do you think?

OC: I don't think so. There were a couple of families. I think that they ended up buying their own homes. This was maybe 20 or 25 years ago, and they were fairly cheap then. But nothing had really changed, very little, even after I left. Other than that, they just kept dying off. There are hardly any of us left now.

DP: I know in the '70s the Métis Society were building a lot of homes in the North, so some probably got homes built by the Métis Society that were a little more permanent?

OC: That's in the towns like Meadow Lake. But in our community, where we lived, we just built our own homes, out of logs. And we cut our trees down with an axe. Just notched the logs up until where you put the roof on, and our insulation was just mud

and grass mixed together in a big old tub, and you just filled in the cracks from the inside and outside, and that was it. We didn't mess around.

DP: And then people lived in the houses for quite a long time?

OC: Yes, we moved around. So, there were times when we would move, and then would come back and live in that same house. Sometimes other people would live there while we were gone. We'd go for six months or so.

DP: So, most of the people in the community didn't own their own homes or property?

OC: No.

DP: Were there any attempts by government to move people to town?

OC: I couldn't say for sure. I was just a child, so I probably wouldn't have known. If there were any attempts, they didn't tell me.

DP: What are your best memories about living in a Road Allowance community?

OC: I guess being with my friends and playing games. That's about all we had to do. There was really nothing else.

DP: What sort of games did you play?

OC: Hide and go seek. I think I was probably 8 or 9-years-old before I got my first bike. I picked pop bottles, and I saved for a long time before I got it.

DP: Are there any bad memories that you'd be willing to share? Does anything stand out that was sort of painful?

OC: Probably when I was a child, when I was very little. We had some rough times. I remember in one of our houses there was no wood on the floor, it was a dirt floor. I think the good times were with my grandparents. They were good people. They raised two of us, me and my older brother. At times, it was touch and go, you know, we were poor.

MC: Was alcohol a problem?

OC: Not in our family, no.

MC: In extended families around there though?

OC: Mostly everyone else around us drank alcohol. But my grandma she wasn't a real drinker and my grandpa didn't drink.

DP: They say that a lot of that started after the war. Before, people didn't drink so much but after the war it really picked up. Did you notice any of that, like when it started to pick up?

OC: No. I can remember. Actually, a lot of my good memories occurred when my uncles and aunts were drinking. We weren't the type of people to party and cause problems. My uncles they were pretty talented with guitars and banjos and fiddles.

DP: So, there would be like jamming, and that sort of thing?

OC. Yes. Yes, we all had fun. We enjoyed it. It was like a big family. They would be out in the bigger room playing their instruments, and drinking beer or whatever. And

us kids would just sit back and watch and sing along, and dance. We never had any problems.

DP: With your family or extended family, did the families speak Michif together, or Cree?

OC: A lot of them mixed French with Cree. That's how I was brought up, so when the people from the reserve would speak their language, it was hard for me to understand because they didn't mix the French with it.

DP: But your grandparents had no problem speaking it?

OC: Well, my grandmother, she had no problem. She spoke German, and French, and Cree, and something else. Because she had three bibles, I can remember, and they were all different.

DP: One thing I've really noticed is that generation of older people spoke multiple languages. They'd be on the U.N. payroll if they were alive today.

MC: I would think she could speak Dakota/Lakota because of their relationship to Moosewoods.

OC: I can remember her talking to some of the ladies off the reserve, and to some of the people from way up North, and I couldn't really understand what they were talking about.

DP: Just bits and pieces?

OC: Yes.

DP: She spoke French, too?

OC: Yes. They all could speak just French or mix it up or speak just Cree, depending on whom they were talking to.

DP: I think a lot of people forget that and put them in this box that everyone just spoke Michif. They knew how to speak French and Cree. When they sang, they all sang in French, and when they prayed often times personally it was in Cree or in Michif.

MC: Yes, even when we were interviewing Mabel, Dad's Mom, she made that same comment that we spoke French, and Cree, and Michif. She said, "We didn't just speak just one thing, all the time."

DP: Did anyone in your family serve in the military or in the war?

OC: I don't think so. There probably was, but I can't remember who it was.

DP: Do you know any traditional Métis stories or songs? If you do would you like to share them?

OC: No, I never wanted to learn them.

DP: Is it something that the old people just said to the younger ones and you just listened?

OC: Basically, yes.

DP: We talked earlier about traditional medicine. I think we covered that. Your Grandma did a lot of that.

MC: Yes, a lot of it.
DP: Your grandma was the Medicine person in the community?
OC: Yes.
DP: Did anyone in your family make beaded or embroidered moccasins?
OC: Yes.
DP: And who was this person?
OC: Most of them.
DP: They were all good at that?
OC: Yes, I would say half of them. My cousin Bernice right up to this day, she still makes moccasins, and gloves, and mitts.
DP: And these were handed down through the family?
OC: Well, they made them for their kids, and nieces, and nephews.
DP: Did people ware them for everyday clothes? They weren't just for special occasions?
OC: Sure, yes. We wore them in the winter time when it was cold because they were warm.
DP: Was it made from moose or deer or both?
OC: Yes, both with some bear.
DP: So, they were embroidered and beaded?
OC: It depended. For going out and if you wanted to go somewhere, you'd wear your beads or whatever. But for work, they were your plain. The mitts had fringes on them but that was about it.
DP: Did any of the animals get decorated, like the horses or the dogs that were used?
OC: No.
DP: How did family celebrate special occasions and holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and New Year's?
OC: Our family never celebrated Christmas that much. As time went by, we were less into it. I think in the beginning we sort of celebrated it a little bit, but nobody bought any presents because nobody could afford it.
DP: New Year's was the big thing?
OC: New Year's was the party time.
DP: So, all your extended family got together to go to your koohkum and mooshom's?
OC: Well, they were there all the time anyway, so it didn't make much difference. Whenever the food was there, they were there to help eat it.
DP: So, everyone came and this was followed by the hugging and kissing stuff, and dancing and jigging?
DP: Your grandma cooked all sorts of good meals for everybody?
OC: Yes.
DP: So, what would have been your koohkum's ideal New Year's feast?

OC: Probably the sweets, like the pies and the cinnamon buns. She made very good bread. I can't ever remember eating brown bread, it was always white bread. The bread and the bannock. The bannock was little, kind of in between bread and a biscuit, but they were bigger. Another thing they made, they were like French fries because they were cooked in grease, and they called them "beignes." They were good. I think at the exhibition they sell them.

DP: With a little bit of sugar on them?

OC: Yes, some of that and a little bit of cinnamon.

DP: So, that was kind of like a Michif donut?

Oliver: Yes, I suppose you could say that.

DP: That was something that everyone looked forward to?

OC: Yes, that was a treat.

DP: During the course of the year that's the one thing that everyone looked forward to?

OC: Yes, a lot of people did.

DP: So, reconnecting with family, sharing stories, news, that sort of thing?

OC: Yes.

DP: Did they travel from a long way, or just immediate from around the road allowance?

OC: No, it was just the people that lived in the area because just about everyone lived there. I don't think there was hardly anyone from far, far away. We were all together. It was surprising how many people, like if I had enough time, I would count, and I would try and remember. But there were a lot of people. I had lots of aunts and uncles, and cousins. Because each family had 8,9,10, 12 kids per family. So there were a lot of us.

MC: Were you guys ever at Loon Lake at all? (31:22)

OC: Oh yes.

DP: Was that a road allowance?

MC: Well, it just clued in to me that one of Charles Trottier's homes was in Loon Lake.

OC: We never lived there, but we would go there, and up as far as MacDowall.

DP: Was anybody in your family involved with the Métis Society, or work with the Métis Society?

OC: I don't think so.

DP: They didn't come around to try and recruit people?

OC: I don't remember.

DP: Something the older people would have talked about?

OC: I think back then in those days, kids were supposed to be kids and adults had their own thing. So, we didn't get involved in their business.

DP: It wasn't considered polite when the adults were speaking to be anywhere near them?

OC: Probably not, they would have said, "Go play."
DP: Was anyone in your family involved in the 1885 Resistance?
MC: Yes, a whole gang of them. This would be in his great-grandfather's era. You have all of the Trottiers from Round Prairie that are up here, even the one that is buried up there. That's all from that extended Trottier Family from Round Prairie.
DP: Carons too? Are you related to the Parenteaus?
MC: Just Carons. They are the only ones that I know of. And Sansregrets?
OC: Well, Sansregrets. My aunt was married to a Sansregret. My cousin Clifford was a Sansregret. But we were different people. Let's put it that way. And there were a lot of good memories from where I come from anyway, and some weren't so great, but most of them were good.
DP: People didn't dwell too much on what happened after 1885, they just lived their lives, and didn't talk about it?
OC: No, they didn't. We were happy to sit down at the table and have a meal. That meant something to us. We didn't want something that we couldn't have. Like kids nowadays, if they see another kid with a toy, they want it. We weren't like that back then, maybe because we weren't out in the public to see all these other things, I don't know. So that's one reason that we were fairly happy growing up as children.
MC: It's just kind of funny that they would undergo such hardships from the 1885 event directly, and yet, by his time, they don't talk about them any more. That letter I have talks about his great-grandfather's home being burned down, and the animals all killed at Round Prairie, and then them having to get to the States and stay there until was safe for them to come back. It's all in this little letter I have. Then by the time it gets to my dad's generation, which isn't that far, they don't want to talk about it anymore.
OC: It changed lots in that short time. See I can remember the guy that my grandma was married to first before she married my grandpa. We called him "Mooshom." I can remember all of us kids were scared of him. I don't know why. If he just scared us as if we were supposed to be scared of him, or if he was mean or wasn't mean, I can't remember. But I can remember as little kids we were scared of him. When I was 7 or 8-years-old, he was old already. So, he must have been a lot older than my grandma. I remember him sitting in the chair in front of the house. And his eyes, they were running, I guess he had weepy eyes or whatever, and he looked really mean. We called him "Mooshom," and he probably died when I was 12 or 13-years-old.
DP: Were there a lot of mixed families in that regard back then? Say when a man or a woman would die before their time, and there'd be kids, and then more kids would come together?
OC: I think so, yes.
DP: And people were generally accepting of the mixed families?

OC: Yes, I think if you go further back before my generation, I've heard that there were cousins marrying cousins. I guess there was no one else out there. I guess a female was a female and a male was a male.

DP: Do you have anything else that you'd like to share about living in a Métis Road Allowance community? Anything else that you'd like to add, Oliver, that stands out? Or something that you'd like people today to know, like your grandkids for instance, or non-Métis people, what was it like that stands out?

OC: Well, if you would have asked me that question 25 years ago, I would have probably said, "To raise a child the way that I was brought up," I would say, "No." And you're asking me that question now, I'd say that's the way to go. When I compare families today—and I'm not talking about wealthy families, because they obviously have it made in the shade—I'm talking about your average type of family and the poor families. It was a lot better back then than it is now. There was a lot more respect, respect for the Elders. You didn't use the "F" word at the dinner table like they do now. The kids would never mouth off to their parents. Never, ever would you ever hear of something like that. Kids are killing their moms and their dads nowadays and it's just not the same.

DP: And they had more respect for each other, too?

OC: Yes.

DP: Would you say that within the family and the community, that everyone had an obligation to each other, to be a good kid, good parent, or good grandparent? And everyone kind of had to help each other out in that regard?

OC: Up to a point, yes. As children, we all had our chores to do. We never had to be told, or most of us anyway, we knew we had to do it.

DP: Do you think that's a key difference now?

OC: That is a big difference now.

MC: Was there a lot of grandparents raising the kids rather than the parents? (39:50)

OC: A lot of the grandparents, yes. Back in those days, it wasn't abnormal for a young girl to have a child when she was 15 years old. If she was 15 or she was 22, it didn't really matter too much.

DP: So, in that instance, I know in a lot of other places in our society, whether they were small town Catholics, there was a lot of ostracization for the girl and the child. Did that happen in Road Allowance communities, or did people just accept it as a fact of life?

OC: Well not everyone would accept it. I guess it depended on who you were at the time. If you were mature enough to get along in live, then I guess it was okay to have a child. Because there were a lot of people who got married, the girls got married when they were 15, the boys got married when they were 15, 16, 17 years old. And they had kids and raised a family right up until they were in their 80s. They did okay. But kids today, there are kids who are 30 years old who are still living at home.

DP:  Do you have anything else you'd like to add?
OC:  I don't think so.  Like I said, I left home early so there probably isn't too much.  I went home every winter after I left home, up until I was in my twenties.  It was basically the same thing.  Work in the bush in winter, and head back south and work on construction in the summer.  So that was basically it.
DP: Thank you ever so much.
OC:  You're welcome.