

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: MR. BIRSTON & MISS
BIRSTON (GRANDDAUGHTER)

INFORMANT'S ADDRESS: ST. AMBROISE

INTERVIEW LOCATION:

TRIBE/NATION:

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

DATE OF INTERVIEW:

INTERVIEWER: MARGARET STOBIE

INTERPRETER:

TRANSCRIBER: JOANNE GREENWOOD

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HIGHLIGHTS:

- Very general discussion of the informant's life.
Mr. Birston: Should I tell them my age?

Margaret: You said you can tell from the time you were five
years old?

Mr. Birston: I can't tell you from when I was five. I tell
you in the old days when I was a schoolboy, going to school. I
used to cut, I used to go out with the old time harvest, you
know. I used to cut the hay with a sickle then. I cut wheat

down together and I go to the next section there. At threshing time, they would come. They put the sheaves in the barn and I thresh it in a cradle. All winter.

Margaret: Well now where were you born?

Mr. Birston: I was born at Lockport.

Margaret: At Lockport.

Mr. Birston: At Lockport. It was called St. Andrews then, you know, but it is changed, Lockport now, you know.

Margaret: And where was your father from?

Mr. Birston: Where was my father from? My father and my grandfather come from the old country.

Margaret: And these are the Birstons who were some of the original Selkirk settlers?

Mr. Birston: Yeah. And my grandfather come from Scotland, the old country. And my father, he was born here.

Margaret: And you were born...?

Mr. Birston: In Manitoba.

Margaret: Well, when you were a young man did you go hunting and fishing or were you farming or what sort of thing did you do?

Mr. Birston: Oh, I was a farmer. I come back up here and I went into ranching and I went broke on the ranching and I lost my place. I had hard luck, you know. My family all got sick. All got sick all at one time, you know. I buried three girls, you know. Those hospital bills, you know, it sure counts up. I lost my cattle and broke all my homestead. I went broke on that. I was born in 1874, the 13th day of October. I'll be 91 years of age this fall.

Margaret: You've seen a lot of changes going on?

Mr. Birston: Oh, I've seen lots of them, I did.

Granddaughter: I remember he used to go hunting, you know. And he went out one day and he was going to bring us some ducks. And two blackbirds on the fence post and he killed the blackbirds and never mind the ducks. (laughs) My brother Walter used to laugh at him about that. He hit the blackbirds, not the ducks.

Margaret: Well, what sort of thing were people doing?

Mr. Birston: Well, they were all farmers, you know, farming people. All of my people.

Margaret: All through the Red River?

Mr. Birston: Spread out all over the country.

Margaret: The Red River settlement?

Mr. Birston: I got some in Vancouver, some in Calgary, some in Edmonton, and...

Margaret: I met in Fisher Branch, a Mrs. Chassey whose mother was a Birston. She is now about 85.

Mr. Birston: You met her?

Margaret: Yeah. Early in the week, or last week.

Mr. Birston: Oh yeah.

Margaret: Well, were there any adventures that you had that you remember particularly? Were there any fights or scrapes or anything else you got into?

Mr. Birston: No.

Granddaughter: He's been in lots of fights. You can't say that. He got in lots of fights. He used to swim the river and everything else. To go and see his girlfriend.

Margaret: You swam the river?

Mr. Birston: Lockport, yeah.

Granddaughter: He used to drink a lot. He said Uncle David laughed, that's his youngest brother, and he tried to cross it.

He was going to see his girlfriend and he said if the river didn't drown him, he would live until he died. That's what Herman always laughs about. He used to tell Herman these stories.

Mr. Birston: I swam the Red River. One year I got on east side the river and the ice was breaking up, you know, and the water was coming on the shore. I went on the east side and the west side and I was going to go home. There was deep water along the shore, you know, but out in the centre it is good. So I went there and I waded across up to my knees on the east side. Come to the west side, I got halfway across and down I went! I went up the river singing, "If the river don't drown me, I'll live until I die, for I'm a river driver." My poor

old mother-in-law and my poor old father-in-law never forgot that.

Margaret: Did you do any work on the river? Were you ever on the river boats?

Granddaughter: You never worked on the river boats but you worked on the bridge they were putting in there, eh? With the river boats?

Mr. Birston: I worked on the river boats in Lake Winnipeg, you know, once. And I only made one trip and that sickened me. It was tough, the Red River, rocks, big waves. By golly, I thought if I get back to the Selkirk, I won't come back here again. That's the last trip I made.

Margaret: I had a trip just like that last month. (laughter)
On the Kenora.

Mr. Birston: Well, I'm glad you come and seen us.

Margaret: Well, I wanted to.

Mr. Birston: Will you be going back and seeing my grandson?

Margaret: No. I was up in Churchill in the beginning of July, early July. And now I am visiting other places.

Mr. Birston: Yeah. No, thank you. (When offered a cigarette)
I used to smoke but if I smoke a cigarette, I have the habit of chewing the butt. I put the butt in my mouth.

Margaret: Well, these butts are no good.

Granddaughter: He remembers all about how he used to draw wood with the Red River carts and all that.

Margaret: Did you use Red River carts?

Mr. Birston: Red River carts, yeah, sure. I rode them old carts. There is a mark on my hand when I was cutting grain. I was a kid, you know, and my father laid his sickle down. I grabbed his sickle up and sliced my finger like this. That mark on there.

Margaret: Were there ever any bad fires or anything like that in the settlement?

Mr. Birston: Bad fires? Did they ever did. All the prairie fires that burned, my father lost lots of hay in prairie fires. He'd grow it way up west (inaudible) and a prairie fire come

and it would come and burn -- my father burned all his hay one fall. They had thirty-five head of cattle to feed and they had no hay.

Margaret: How did the fires start?

Mr. Birston: How did it start? Oh, somebody started it up. You wouldn't know where it had come from but somebody started the fire up. Those fires could come from a long ways, you know. It was all open country them days, you see. It just had a clean sweep around.

Margaret: And you kept a lot of cattle?

Mr. Birston: I kept about twenty-five head.

Margaret: That is a good lot.

Mr. Birston: And pigs. My grandfather, you know, I used to keep, I lived with my grandfather and my dad all of my young days, you know. And after my grandfather died, everything went to pieces. My old dad started drinking, drinking, drinking, and we was poor. We was poor after my grandfather died.

Margaret: When did you come up here?

Mr. Birston: Well, now, I don't know, by golly. I was about the age of my boys. Charlie is fifty-eight. About fifty-eight years ago. Charlie, my boy, my son, he was just a two year old kid when we come up here. You were two weeks old. He was two weeks old when we moved up here. And he says he is fifty-seven.

Granddaughter: It was about sixty years since we came up.

Mr. Birston: I was forty-seven. I should have gave you one of them. I never thought about it. I've been talking so much.

Margaret: Well, have you farmed up here all the time?

Mr. Birston: I had a homestead down east and I lost it. (Inaudible) All my life (inaudible). I worked with one man for eight years on his farm at Poplar Point. I worked 21 seasons with Bell brothers at Poplar Point. Seasons, you know. I spent all my life at Poplar Point, in the Portage district.

Margaret: Did you ever do any fishing on the lake?

Mr. Birston: Yes. I used to fish on that lake. I put my time

on that old lake in the winter. When I first come up here, they had open air fishing. Nothing, just you pull on that and by golly your mitts are all froze up. Put them in your bosom and take out a pair. (Inaudible) That is slavery work. I was freezing my fingers and freezing to death so I quit that job and I got to run the cabooses. I liked that. Built a caboose on sleighs and a team of horses on and had a heater stove in it and wood and everything and it was comfortable. To load them fish and come in and dry your mitts. Dry your mitts and warm your hands. I worked there a while.

(Inaudible conversation)

Mr. Birston: That is my grandson there again.

Margaret: Are you a brother of Herman's?

Grandson: Cousin.

Margaret: Cousin.

Grandson: Do you know Herman?

Margaret: Yes, I was up in Churchill and he told me to come down to meet his grandfather because his grandfather used to tell him stories.

Grandson: Oh yeah.

Margaret: I met him. I was up in Churchill visiting some of the old people that live up there that used to be at York Factory. And I met him and he is working hard with his hockey team and his baseball team and looking after the boats going out, taking visitors and so on. So he told me to be sure and come and see his grandfather.

Grandson: Yeah, he was home about a month ago. We spend all our time together when he is around.

(End of Interview)

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