

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: HELEN ADELAIDE OUELLETTE
INFORMANT'S ADDRESS: 101 HOWELL AVENUE
SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN
INTERVIEW LOCATION: 101 HOWELL AVENUE
SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN
TRIBE/NATION: METIS
LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 02/21/84
INTERVIEWER: JUDY M. THIBODEAU
INTERPRETER:
TRANSCRIBER: HEATHER YAWORSKI
SOURCE: SASKATOON NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOC.
& BATOCHÉ CENTENARY CORP.
TAPE NUMBER: #IH-SD.38
DISK: TRANSCRIPT DISC #156
PAGES: 22
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HIGHLIGHTS:

- recollections of childhood family experiences and school
- comments on economic conditions, racial attitudes, church
and politics
(NOTE: There is a very loud hum on Side A of this tape for the
first 9 pages, frequently making it impossible to decipher what
is being said.)

Judy: Today is February 21, 1984, and I'm speaking with
Mrs. Helen Ouellette in regards to Metis history. When you
think about yourself as a person how do you see yourself? How
would you describe yourself? Would you say you're just an
ordinary person?

Helen: Yes, that would be it, an ordinary person.

Judy: Hard-working?

Helen: Yes.

Judy: When you look back at your life and everything that has happened in it, how would you describe that life? What kind of a life do you think you've had?

Helen: Oh, I think I had a pretty good life.

Judy: Thinking back, how do you think your life is different from your mother's life?

Helen: Well they went through more hardship, eh, because really, like their life wasn't modern like. We have lights and stuff, and well, (inaudible) shoes and stuff. I don't think they had that when they were young, you know, what we have now. So I think I have a better life than she did.

Judy: How about from your grandmother's life?

Helen: Well, that she told me, you know, (inaudible) you know, we had a better life than she did.

Judy: Can you tell me the things that mattered the most in your life? Did your family, did your religion?

Helen: To be happy, I guess, and to get along with kids, the children and the husband, as long as you're happy.

Judy: Can you tell me your most important problems? Do you feel that you have any problems?

Helen: Not really.

Judy: How about needs? Do you have any important needs?

Helen: No.

Judy: Can you tell me what it's like for you as a woman to work with men?

Helen: To work with men?

Judy: Yes.

Helen: Well what do you mean, like?

Judy: Well, have you ever held a job that, that you've had to work side by side with a man and have you had a man as a boss?

Helen: Well, to be honest with you, I don't remember. The only place I worked, as I told you, I did all the (inaudible)

Judy: So you never had any problems?

Helen: No.

Judy: How about, what is it like for you as a woman to be the centre of a family?

Helen: Pretty nice, I guess.

Judy: What's it like to have such a large family?

Helen: I don't mind it.

Judy: You said you had two boys and six girls. Do you find that they have a lot of dependence on you?

Helen: Oh some have, yes. But they're all grown up now and they're married, so...

Judy: As a woman what's it like for you to go to church?

Helen: It's nice to go to church, go to church every Sunday lately. I didn't before but I am now.

Judy: Have you ever been in Metis politics, involved in Metis politics?

Helen: No.

Judy: Have you ever had to deal with the government?

Helen: No.

Judy: Could you tell me how you think city life is different from a small town?

Helen: I really don't know, I can't answer that question. Living alone I've been in the city all, most of my life and I just don't remember what it was like in the small town.

Judy: Do you think it would be different for you if you were born white?

Helen: No, I don't think so, I'm satisfied what I am.
(laughs)

Judy: How about if you were born Treaty?

Helen: Oh well, if I was born Treaty, well at least I'd have to accept that, I wouldn't care.

Judy: If you had a chance to be born again what do you think you would do different?

Helen: Well for one thing I think I would have finished school. That was one thing I would do different if I had to do it again. Went to high school and that, take a business course or something.

Judy: What would you want to do again?

Helen: Again?

Judy: If you had a chance.

Helen: I tried, probably trying to get a job sometime.

Judy: Do you think you would choose to be a man?

Helen: No, I don't think so.

Judy: Why not?

Helen: Well, I don't know. I'm just satisfied with myself.

Judy: How do you see your future?

Helen: Now?

Judy: Yes. Well, the future you have ahead of you.

Helen: I don't know. Well, I'm not going to live that long so it's just waiting. I'm over the hill.

Judy: What do you think the future of your children will be like?

Helen: I really don't know.

Judy: What about their children, your grandchildren?

Helen: I don't know, can't tell about that.

Judy: Where do you think native people will have a better future? Do you think they'll be better off in the country, or stay in the city, or perhaps move up north?

Helen: I don't know, I can't answer that question, be better in the country or not.

Judy: But you find that being in the city is better for you yourself?

Helen: For myself, yes.

Judy: Looking back at all the problems you had in your life growing up and so on, how did you find that you remained strong through all those problems?

Helen: What is that?

Judy: How did you find that you remained strong through all those problems? Did you have spiritual help -- the church, friends?

Helen: No, I don't think we never had no help from anybody. No, we always managed.

Judy: You just depended on each other in the family?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: Tell me what you remember about the daily life of growing up in your family.

Helen: Actually I don't remember. We went to school (inaudible). We quit school when I was about 15 or 16 years old (inaudible).

Judy: What do you remember about your parents when you were growing up, things that they would do? Do you remember your mother baking special foods, or certain things like that?

Helen: Oh yeah, my mother used to bake a lot.

Judy: What type of things did she used to bake?

Helen: Oh, she made cakes and things like that, you know. (inaudible).

Judy: Did she make bannock?

Helen: Oh yes, she used to make bannock many days, and all those glazed donuts.

Judy: How would you describe things as you were growing up? Were they happy years?

Helen: Yes, they were happy years.

Judy: You don't remember having any years that were...

Helen: Bad, no.

Judy: Tell me what you remember as a young girl about a simple day in your life during the summer? From the moment you got up to the moment you went to bed. What do you remember doing?

Helen: Oh, I used to go and visit my grandma -- she's about two blocks away from us and I used to go and visit. Used to play with them kids. And just go out with these girlfriends that I had and (inaudible). Could you shut that off?

Judy: What things did you and your grandmother used to talk about? Did she used to tell you old stories perhaps?

Helen: No she didn't. My grandma wasn't, she wasn't one to, you know, tell you stories like that. When you go in there she feeds you and everything, but as far as her sitting down and telling us stories, no, she wasn't like that. And my grandpa,

I just barely remember him because he died when I was small.

Judy: Tell me about the house that you grew up in. For instance how many rooms did it have? Did it have running water or electricity?

Helen: Yes it did, it had running water and electricity. We live in so many houses, we used to live in (inaudible). Three bedrooms, frontroom, or livingroom I should say, and a kitchen, bathroom.

Judy: So these were fairly modern homes then?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: You didn't have wooden floors or anything?

Helen: Yeah, wooden floors. Well, we did have wooden floors but my mother used to buy those, you know, those rugs years ago, they have kind of flower, you know, flower ones -- those she used to have.

Judy: What were the houses made out of? Were they made out of logs or were they made out of lumber?

Helen: Lumber.

Judy: Tell me about the furniture that you had in your house?

Helen: Well, we didn't have a T.V., but we had those old-fashioned, what you call those gramophones. And we had a stove, we didn't have a fridge we had a stove, tables and chairs, beds, chesterfield, we didn't have no end tables, those kind of things.

Judy: Describe how large your back yard was.

Helen: Well it was a pretty fair size. My mother used to put a garden out back.

Judy: Was it fenced in?

Helen: Yes, it was fenced in.

Judy: Did your father own the land?

Helen: No, it was rented.

Judy: Was it right in Saskatoon city or was it along the edge?

Helen: No, it's right in Saskatoon city.

Judy: How far were your nearest neighbours?

Helen: Well, there were next-door neighbours on both sides.

Judy: Were the houses build very close together?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: Did the houses look similar, did they look the same, built the same?

Helen: Yes.

Judy: Do you remember the Metis and the white people living close together?

Helen: I suppose there was some, yes, but where we lived there was none. My grandma used to live three blocks away from us.

Judy: So you remember it mostly being Metis around your home, or white?

Helen: No, there was whites on the (inaudible).

Judy: At the time when you were young what did the saying road allowance people mean to you?

Helen: Road allowance?

Judy: Did you ever hear that term?

Helen: No. I don't remember people living on road allowances, they lived in, like they used to go and dig rock or something, you know, just to get a job off these farmers. They used to live in the farmer's land but not off the, you know, roads like the way they described it. That's not true. Like they live on the land, dig rocks, but as far as I remember when my mother, even my mother never mentioned that. Road allowance, I don't know.

Judy: What area do you remember them doing such a thing as living off...

Helen: Well I didn't, you know, like maybe often my mother like used to maybe dig rock, and they get a job off these farmers and they live off the, you know, they live in the, they move into the farmer's land like, you know, they dig rock there but they didn't dig road allowances that I know of.

Judy: They didn't live off the side that you can remember?

Helen: No. No.

Judy: When you grew up and raised a family of your own did things change for you? Did you find that your living standard increased, that you had a better home, more clothing, that you were able to give the children more things?

Helen: Oh, at first we were poor, you know, we worked hard (inaudible). And gradually we, we lived better than we did before.

Judy: So things did get better for you?

Helen: Oh yeah, I think so, better way than before.

Judy: Could you tell me what some of your responsibilities were when you were growing up? What your chores were at home.

Helen: Oh, we had to do housework like washing dishes, or I helped with the housework.

Judy: How about your brothers and sisters, what were their responsibilities?

Helen: They all had to pitch in, you know, work.

Judy: Work around the yard and in the house?

Helen: Around the yard and so on, yeah.

Judy: What special things did your family do together that you can remember? Did you ever go camping or berry picking, or...

Helen: Yes we did. Berry picking, we did.

Judy: The whole family would go out and pick berries?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: Do you have a good time doing that?

Helen: Oh yeah. Picnic.

Judy: You used to have picnics, quite a few?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: What sort of things would happen on the picnic?

Helen: Oh, let's see now. Don't know, just...

Judy: Just relax and eat food?

Helen: That's about it, yeah.

Judy: When you were young and you thought of the word family did you think of your own immediate family -- your parents, brothers and sisters; or did that include your uncles, your aunts, your grandparents? Was that all family to you?

Helen: Oh yes. It was all family.

Judy: How do you remember your mother?

Helen: She was kind, she was really kind and she wasn't one to cut up people or anything. She was hard-working. And she went to church and she was good to us.

Judy: How about your father, how do you remember him?

Helen: Oh, he's kind too, easy going. And he's (inaudible).

Judy: Are there any other family members that you remember especially?

Helen: My grandma, she's good to us. She's like a mother to us. We really favor her.

Judy: Did you have, did you have strong family loyalty? Do you remember sticking up for each other no matter what that other person did?

Helen: I suppose we did, yeah.

Judy: Can you remember some of the things your father did for a living?

Helen: Well, he worked at the Canada Packers. Then when he was out of work I think we were on welfare for a while but that's about all I remember.

Judy: Did he ever try to earn money in other ways like selling firewood or meat, hunting or fishing for the family for food?

Helen: Some, maybe firewood and some manure, you know, he was hauling manure.

Judy: Do you remember your parents having a garden?

Helen: Yes. My mother used to have a big garden.

Judy: Did she used to preserve things?

Helen: Oh yeah.

Judy: Do you remember owning any livestock?

Helen: Yes, I think my dad used to have a team and that's what he used to haul manure, you know, he had a wagon and team.

Judy: The times that your father was unemployed, how did it affect the rest of the family? Was there a tense atmosphere, or did things just usually go along as they always did?

Helen: I don't remember really, I don't remember that part.

Judy: What do you remember your uncles, or other Metis people doing for a living at that time?

Helen: I think they did the same thing, like maybe saw wood, and haul manure, things like that, or go and dig rocks in the summertime or something.

Judy: How old were you when you first got your first paying job? And what was that job?

Helen: Let's see. I was 16, I guess -- we used to get \$13 a week.

Judy: And what, what did you do?

Helen: A waitress, yeah, something like waitressing.

Judy: You were waitressing at a cafe?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: What other types of jobs have you had during your life?

Helen: That's about it that I remember.

Judy: You were just a homemaker the rest of the time?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: What kind of work do you think that other Metis women your age did during the same period?

Helen: I don't remember, I never paid no attention to what other people did, really.

Judy: In your community when you were growing up, what sticks out in your mind about it? What about your neighbourhood or your part of the city that you remember?

Helen: I don't remember anything like that.

Judy: Do you remember if there were any new buildings put up that are still up today?

Helen: Oh yeah, there was a lot of buildings put up, like there were a lot of changes like, you know, has grown up.

Judy: Do you remember if there was more white people than Metis people living in your community?

Helen: I would say yes, because a lot of them are, you know, they passed on, there was quite a few Metis then.

Judy: What language do you remember being spoken in your parents' home?

Helen: Well it would be Metis, I guess.

Judy: Cree.

Helen: Yeah. Mixed and English.

Judy: Was that the first language that you learned?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: Say a bit of Cree mixed with English.

Helen: Yes.

Judy: When were you first aware of being Metis?

Helen: I think when I start school. It didn't really bother me, it didn't matter really, you know, who I was, what nationality I was. It didn't bother me.

Judy: How often do you remember your parents thinking and speaking of themselves as Metis?

Helen: They didn't that I know of, they didn't speak of anything like that.

Judy: Did they ever say that they were proud?

Helen: They just took it for granted, they took it for granted. That's what they are so they didn't even know about it.

Judy: Did they ever say that they were proud of being Metis?

Helen: Probably were, yes.

Judy: Other Metis families that you knew of at that time, did they express pride in being Metis? Or did they just not talk about it?

Helen: I never paid no attention to them whether they did or not. I just, I wasn't the kind of person that, you know, paid attention to stuff like that. I don't know whether they did or not. I just don't remember.

Judy: Do you remember your parents, or your grandparents, perhaps your uncles ever telling you stories about Metis history?

Helen: No.

Judy: Did Metis families in the city, did they ever get together for social events such as holidays, weddings, or parties?

Helen: Like New Year's, yes, they got all, you know, they got together at New Year's. They didn't celebrate Christmas but New Year's they did.

Judy: What exactly would they do on that day?

Helen: Oh, they cook, put up, you know, table and they go from one house to the other and they just have a good time.

Judy: Did they used to have any dances?

Helen: Yes they did. Had dances.

Judy: Do you remember your father ever wearing a Metis sash or other traditional Metis clothing?

Helen: No.

Judy: Do you remember your mother dressing in Metis style?

Helen: No.

Judy: Did your parents know how to jig?

Helen: My uncle played the violin that I know of, but...

Judy: Do you remember if he...

Helen: I just can't think whoever jiggled.

Judy: Do you remember what songs that your uncles used to play?

Helen: Oh gee, those are quite old, I don't remember. Like old-time, you know.

Judy: Any Metis songs?

Helen: He did used to sing one Chipewyan, I don't remember.

Judy: You don't remember what it was about though?

Helen: What it was like, yeah.

Judy: Did you know how to jig?

Helen: No I don't.

Judy: Do you remember any non-native relative living in your community and what was your family's relationship with them? What I'm saying is, did someone in your family marry someone who is white?

Helen: Oh yes.

Judy: What was your family's relationship with that person?

Helen: Like my two, my aunts she married Ukrainian and, well two of my aunts married Ukrainians. But they lived, one lived at the coast, and let's see, and the other one died when I was very young. I don't remember her.

Judy: So you don't remember having any other non-native relatives while you were growing up?

Helen: No just, just those two aunts.

Judy: Do you remember any of the older people in your family believing and practising the traditional Indian religion?

Helen: No, I don't remember that.

Judy: Do you remember if they ever used sweat lodges?

Helen: No.

Judy: Do you remember them ever believing in Indian medicine?

Helen: No.

Judy: When you lived in the city as years went by, do you remember if your living standards increased or decreased?

Helen: What was the question again?

Judy: Do you remember if your living...

(END OF SIDE A)

Judy: Did your living standards increase or decrease over the years?

Helen: I think it got better. And then I got married when I was young, eh. I was only, well, not quite 19 and I got married, so I guess I'd say it got better.

Judy: When you were growing up in your family did your family fit into the white community, did they get along with them?

Helen: Oh yes.

Judy: Do you remember when you were young the white kids ever teasing you or calling you names because you were Metis?

Helen: No. No, I couldn't say they did.

Judy: Do you remember if you or any other Metis people that you knew, do you remember them ever getting paid less than a white person for the same work?

Helen: I don't remember.

Judy: Were you ever denied a job because you were Metis?

Helen: No.

Judy: Do you know of anybody who was?

Helen: No, not that I know of.

Judy: Did you feel comfortable when you went into the stores or cities where there were a lot of white people?

Helen: Yes I did.

Judy: Growing up in the city you felt comfortable with them?

Helen: Yes, always. You know, raised in the city so it didn't really bother me.

Judy: Do you remember if the town authorities such as the police, did they treat your family fairly?

Helen: Yes.

Judy: You never had any problems with them?

Helen: No.

Judy: Did your family and other Metis people that you know of, did they go to social events that included non-native people?

Helen: No, I don't remember that either.

Judy: You don't remember that if your family went to a dance that there was white people there with them?

Helen: No I don't.

Judy: Did the city that you live in, in Saskatoon, did they ever try to force Metis people to move away?

Helen: Not that I know of.

Judy: You felt accepted in the city?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: Let's talk a little about your religion for a while.

Do you remember the church playing an important role in your life?

Helen: Oh yes.

Judy: How would you say they played an important role?

Helen: Well I don't know, my mother was strong Catholic, you know, like my parents were. And she used to go to church all the time and take us to church. So that was very important in my life when we were growing up.

Judy: It was important in your life as you got older?

Helen: Well I got, got away from it for a while and now, you know, start going to church quite often now.

Judy: Do you remember your parents going to church regularly?

Helen: Oh yes.

Judy: Do you remember if you did?

Helen: Yes we did when... Before I got married we used to go to church all the time. But after I got married I kind of, you know...

Judy: Do you remember the priest ever visiting your home?

Helen: Oh yes, they used to come to the house to visit.

Judy: What would he talk about when he was visiting you?

Helen: I don't know, but he used to, like, talk to my mother and we didn't, I didn't pay that much attention, but he used to come and visit my parents.

Judy: Do you remember your parents or yourself ever going to the priest for help other than the religious advice?

Helen: No. No I don't think so.

Judy: Did you ever go to the church to pray or anything for, for help?

Helen: No.

Judy: Do you think the church has more or less influence today than it had in the past?

Helen: What do you mean they...?

Judy: Do you think they have a stronger hold on people today, or stronger hold on them in the past?

Helen: Gee, I don't know. It's yes and no, but...

Judy: How is it yes or no?

Helen: I don't know. Like, like we say Christian people, I mean there's more people going to church now, I think, who turned Christian.

Judy: You think there's more than in the olden days of Metis people?

Helen: I suppose they went to church too, but I know my parents did but I don't know about the others, really.

Judy: Do you think the church has generally helped Metis people face their problems?

Helen: No, I don't think so. I don't think Metis people goes to church that, you know.

Judy: Let's talk about school for a little while. What do you remember about going to school?

Helen: Not much really. I just went to school.

Judy: What do you remember the school that you went to being like?

Helen: St. Mary's school I went to and it was a nice school. I got along with everybody there and the teachers. And...

Judy: I remember being told once that the boys and the girls were segregated, which means split up.

Helen: Oh yes. Well that was the rules those days. They had to. Girls play on one side and then the boys on the other side.

Judy: Do you think that was good, or do you like it the way it is now, boys and girls playing together, being taught together?

Helen: Well I don't know what it's like now, but I know when I was going to school I didn't mind it like, you know, girls playing one side the fence and the boys on the other side. I don't know what it's like now.

Judy: What do you remember about your teachers?

Helen: My teachers were good to me.

Judy: Do you remember them encouraging you in your studies?

Helen: Oh yes. Oh yes, they helped me a lot.

Judy: What kind of studies do you remember taking?

Helen: Well let me see. Science, and literature, arithmetic things like that.

Judy: Just the basic subjects. What language do you remember being allowed to speak in school? Do you remember being allowed to speak, as you said, the Cree-English mixture that you grew up with? Or was it just one language?

Helen: Just one language, we talk English.

Judy: Were ever allowed to speak anything else in school?

Helen: Well, I guess we could have but we didn't and they didn't say anything to us.

Judy: Do you feel that you belonged in school, or did you feel uncomfortable there?

Helen: No, I felt comfortable, because the teachers were good to me.

Judy: You felt as if you fit in?

Helen: I felt relaxed.

Judy: What do you, what did you enjoy about school?

Helen: Let me see. I don't know but I liked school -- everything about it, I guess. We used to be in plays and stuff like that, especially on Christmas, and I really enjoyed that.

Judy: Did your parents encourage you to do well in school?

Helen: Yes.

Judy: Was that important to them that you got a good education?

Helen: Yeah.

Judy: Do you remember them ever teaching you Metis or Indian history in school?

Helen: Oh yes. They teach us Indian history, I don't remember about Metis.

Judy: But you remember them teaching you something about Indian history?

Helen: Yes.

Judy: How do you remember the kids treating you in school, the white kids?

Helen: Well, I had a lot of friends. They treat me pretty good that I know of.

Judy: Do you remember ever having to fight with them?

Helen: No.

Judy: Looking back at your school years how do you remember them? Do you think your experience was good or bad?

Helen: It was good.

Judy: I'll ask you questions here about politics, the first part here is about party politics.

Helen: Don't ask about politics. I don't know anything about that.

Judy: You don't, you've never been involved with politics or anything?

Helen: No.

Judy: Have you voted?

Helen: Yes I voted, but I never...

Judy: Do you remember your parents voting?

Helen: Oh yes, they always vote.

Judy: Do you remember which party that they voted for?

Helen: Well that time it used to be Liberals, or I don't know NDP or whatever, Social Credit, I don't know. That was quite a, quite a long time ago. I forget now who they voted, I know they voted.

Judy: Do you remember any politicians when you were young visiting your parents' home?

Helen: No, I don't remember.

Judy: Do you know if the church was ever involved in politics?

Helen: Gee, I don't remember.

Judy: Do you remember the Metis people ever discussing politics, perhaps even when you were older?

Helen: No, I don't remember that.

Judy: You never got involved in that?

Helen: No, I didn't get involved.

Judy: These politics are Metis politics, these questions. Were you yourself ever involved in the 1930 Saskatchewan Metis

Society during those years that the Society was?

Helen: I was too young. I wouldn't remember that.

Judy: Do you remember your parents ever being involved?

Helen: Yes, my parents were involved, but I just don't remember. I couldn't tell you anything about that because I was too young and I don't remember what they talked about.

Judy: Do you remember, perhaps you would remember some of these names that were involved with this organization: Joe LaRocque?

Helen: Yes, I think he was. Seems like to ring a bell.

Judy: Do you remember anything that he did?

Helen: I don't remember. It's just the names like, you know, just the names that you mention.

Judy: How about Joe Ross?

Helen: No, I don't remember him.

Judy: Do you remember Tom Major? Joe McKenzie?

Helen: That was in the '30s?

Judy: Yes.

Helen: Gee, I don't remember.

Judy: Do you remember Sol Pritchard?

Helen: Seems like that rings a bell, Pritchard, some Pritchard anyway.

Judy: Okay, thank you for your cooperation.

Helen: Okay, now play that...

(END OF SIDE B)

(END OF TAPE)

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