

MARY BELCOURT DAVIS
Interviewer: Mary Nutting

This is the Mary Belcourt Davis interview of May 26, 2005. The interviewer was Mary Nutting (MN), with Vera Miles (VM), daughter of Mary Belcourt Davis, and Cindy Derosier (CD), granddaughter.

Mary was the daughter of Betsy Calahoo, daughter of Louis Calahoo and Annie Donald, who lived in the Flying Shot Lake settlement in the early 1900s. They have brought with them a box of photographs.

Louis Calahoo – Annie Donohue

Betsy Calahoo – d. of Louis and Annie

Mary Belcourt Davis – d. of Betsy

Vera Miles – d. of Mary

Cindy D, granddaughter of Mary

MN Cindy, tell us what you have learned from research into the lives of Louis Calahoo and Annie Donald and the Iroquois Native group they were part of.

CD Lack of documentation was the most challenging part of the learning process. I find it intriguing that the Iroquois were in the west and this is the only documented material that they were in the west. What else..?

MN You spoke of them being at Lac Ste. Anne, and they were known as the praying Iroquois...

CD Praying Iroquois, yes.

MN And they came to the Flying Shot Lake Settlement up here in the late 1800s?

CD Yes, from what I can figure out, it was the very late 1800s when they came up here. I knew that Louis Calahoo was considered... what's the word? He didn't go with the rest of the Metis that were here. He went against the grain and didn't settle with the government issues. He wanted to raise his own crops and the farm and earn his own keep so to speak. That is pretty interesting because our family lineage as we go along, we are all pretty similar that way. I don't know what else to say about this because I'm finding out new stuff now that I didn't know before. So I am still learning... still learning. I would like to know even more.

- MN If you think of other things as they come up we can just add them. When and where were Betsy and Mary born?
- VM Wasn't Mary born in Lac Ste. Anne?
- CD No.
- VM And Betsy?
- MN Was born in Lac Ste. Anne also. According to the 1981 census Mary was born in Lac Ste. Anne. Not Mary, sorry, Betsy.
- CD If she was 23 years old in the census... and my grandma was nine. Holy smokes...
- MN She had her when she was 14 years old.
- CD But I guess in that age it wouldn't have been...
- MN Wouldn't have been that uncommon, I don't think.
- MN Vera, you remember your grandmother Betsy Calihoo. Where did she live when you were a child?
- VM Some of the parts that I remember were around Grande Prairie and in the later years where I remember her were at Sturgeon Lake. Sturgeon Lake was where I spent the most time with her. I used to go out there for my summer holidays, all of us did, my mother and my other brother and sister, we used to go out there and spend the summer months with her.
- MN Can you describe her home and the furniture in her home?
- VM Very sparse. I remember the big stove that sat in the kitchen. I can remember the little partitioned area off it being my grandmother's bedroom. Blankets were all homemade and quilts that she had made herself. An old wooden table sat in the front part likely for eating and whatnot... and over in another corner there was another bed where my Uncle Frank slept, and of course, there was benches and chairs to sit on. Nothing fancy, my grandmother had no radio... not even lights, all were lamps and they were just oil lamps.
- MN Was the house of logs?
- VM Definitely a log house.
- MN Can you describe your grandmother's clothing?
- VM All dark clothing that I can remember. She made all her clothing, even her undergarments. They were made out of white flannelette, cotton underskirts and most of her dresses were black and flowered and that old straw hat. It just makes me cry to see her

plunk it on her head. A purse? I can't remember her carrying a purse. I remember the black beads that she carried and the prayer book.

MN That would be a rosary, the black beads?

VM And black shoes, and in the summer months my grandmother wore moccasins. Cotton stockings and moccasins.

MN So was this every day that she wore the black clothing, or just to church?

VM That was the way she dressed all the time. My grandmother had one dress that she kept special for church on Sundays, and this black coat and this straw hat, that was for going to church on Sundays.

MN So where did she go to church?

VM We went with her when we were there in the summer time in Sturgeon Lake, to the Catholic Church there. I can't remember the name of it.

MN But it was at the mission?

VM At the mission, yeah.

MN What part did religion play in her life?

VM Oh, my grandmother was very religious, very religious. You didn't dare say "damn" in front of her. (snickering)

CD If she could only hear us now. (everyone laughing)

VM Boy, oh boy.

MN You talked yesterday about her praying every night.

VM She prayed in Cree. Every night my grandmother got down on her knees, by her bed, and said her prayers. I can't remember the mornings. Grandma always got up earlier than us to start the fire in the stove... as I said, she was very religious.

MN What level of education did Betsy have?

VM As far as I know she had no education, she couldn't read and she couldn't write.

MN How would you describe her life's occupation?

VM I don't know.

CD I remember my grandmother telling us that she used to make moccasins and take them across the street, to the store for sale and that she got paid.

VM I think most of her money must have come from, as we called it in those days, “relief” and maybe some from the Indian Band because I know they gave her so much money every month. Because I know when we went out there in the summertime – July and August we’d spend out there – my mother bought the majority of the food. And I think that the meat that we used to have somebody would give her – some fresh meat, like a deer or moose or something like that, and a lot dried meat. I can remember eating that dried meat. And the other thing my grandmother was great at was fish – boiled fish and potatoes – fish that Frank used to catch in Sturgeon Lake. And my grandmother would cut them up in small pieces and make boiled fish and potatoes.

MN So those were the foods that you remember....

VM And oatmeal porridge in the morning. Yep, because I know my sister hated porridge and bannock.

CD Lots of bannock.

VM Lots of bannock.

MN Did you like bannock?

VM Oh, god yes (everyone laughing)

MN What did Frank do?

VM He used to go up to the mission. I think he did odd jobs up there for the sisters, because I remember the home; the school was run by the sisters and I think Frank used to go up there and help around doing things for the sisters and he used to fish a lot.

MN So your grandmother lived right across from the Hudson’s Bay?

VM Right across from the Hudson’s Bay

MN What was the community of Sturgeon Lake settlement like? What do you remember from that?

VM Not really that much. You see, the only things I could remember were going to the store across the street and up to the school, and I remember some of the people around there, which were mostly native people. When we were there with my mother we weren’t allowed to go too far away. We wanted to go across the street to the store, because, I remember the guy, I couldn’t tell you what he looks like, I can’t remember, but he used to keep apple juice, little cans of apple juice on ice, and we were allowed to go over there and buy apple juice. If the bus came in, mom would order stuff to bring out, food and whatnot, then we were allowed to go over there and bring home the stuff that she bought.

- MN Tell us about the dorm at the Sturgeon Lake Residential School. Cindy mentioned that you had sleepovers there?
- VM I had some sleepovers there. My grandmother wanted me to learn some of the ways of the girls that lived in there at the dorms. How they were taught to keep themselves clean and how to dress. All the girls that were in the school when I was there in the summer, maybe two or three of them during the summertime, they all had certain jobs that had to be done. I can't even remember the food that was in there. I know that the dorms were very big with lots and lots of beds, single beds in there, and we were made to prepare them when I was there with the girls. We were made to go to bed very early at night and we were up at the crack of dawn, I am sure of it. I can't remember anything to do with food and whatnot but I can remember staying at the dorm and these girls, I can't put faces on them, but I remember them there and the nuns, the nuns wore black in those days.
- MN You talked about the girls curling their hair?
- VM Yep, with sardine can lids. They would cut the lids in little strips and then they would wrap the little strips and they would curl their hair with that. They did it for me one night, they curled my hair and, oh man, I was a real curly-Q then. And also they were taught how to do their own personal hygiene thing which shocked me. Mind you I didn't have that then.
- MN You are talking about hygiene pads?
- VM Yes
- MN And they would do what?
- VM They made them out of flannelette, there was so much thickness to them, they were made out of flannelette and they were sewn. And when the girls had their period, and when were done, they had to take them off, they couldn't throw them away, but had to keep them, then soak them in a bucket of cold water and wash them.
- MN Cindy, have you heard any stories about your great-grandmother that you remember your mother telling, or...
- CD My grandma didn't talk about anything. She was very private. As a matter of fact I can remember my grandma and Lizzy LeClerc talking and I used to ask what kind of language they were talking and they told me it was French. I knew nothing about any native ancestry, nothing whatsoever.
- MN So you did not realize your grandmother was Metis?

- CD Not until I found the box of pictures, and I found the box of pictures, it wasn't just shown to me.
- MN Oh really!!
- CD Oh, yes!
- MN And this after she died, or before she died?
- CD It was about a year before she died, because I started asking her questions but she wouldn't answer.
- MN She wouldn't answer. OK. There is one more question about Betsy Calihoo and then we are going to go on to Mary Belcourt Davis, Cindy's grandmother. Do you remember any practices that Betsy had in dealing with sickness?
- CD No
- VM Mustard plasters, oh gosh yes.
- MN Mustard plasters for a cold?
- VM Because I know when I was a kid, I had pneumonia a lot and my grandmother had quite a few of those old wives tales, and my mother did the same thing when we were sick. Even my sister was the same way. She believed in mustard plasters. I do to this day if I come down with a bad chest cold.
- MN How old were you when you were at the residential school and you would visit there? Was this during your childhood?
- VM Oh, golly, probably ten.
- MN So the date would be around 1940?
- VM Yes, it would be the early 40s.
- MN Where did Betsy's daughter, Mary Belcourt, live as a child? Do you know?
- CD Grande Prairie
- VM Grande Prairie
- MN Can you tell me about her childhood?
- CD I couldn't.
- VM I think my mother had a very, very unhappy childhood, compared to what you know, the way kids were born and raised after. I think my mother's childhood was very unhappy.
- MN How?

- VM No education.
- MN How would you describe her relationship with her family? Did you often see your grandparents or...
- VM I can remember seeing my grandmother a lot.
- CD I believe your grandmother loved your mom but I know that they had a very close relationship. My mom used to speculate that Betsy would tell my grandmother, Mary Belcourt, that it's better that nobody knows that you have native in you. And from what my mom used to tell me (this is all speculation) is that she was sent away to stay with a lot of other people quite often, when she was a young girl, before she got married.
- MN This was your mom, Evelyn?
- CD Yes, my mom telling me, and this was just speculative thoughts, what went on, and even my mom wasn't told and my grandmother lived with us all of my life, until she passed away. My mom, even in the last five years, still speculated a lot about what it might have been like for my grandmother. I know that when they moved from Edmonton to Vancouver, my mom was told by her mom, my great-grandma, not to.
- VM We were also told never to tell anybody that we had Indian blood in us. I know even when I was nineteen, when I first got married, my first husband didn't know we had Indian blood in us, and I can't for the life of me remember how it came out. But now everybody knows.
- MN But now it's acceptable.
- VM Oh yes, we don't keep it quiet. And even my son and my two little granddaughters know. The other day before we left to come out here, my little granddaughter, who is eleven, she came to me and said: "Grandma, have you got Indian in you?" And I tell them the truth and say, "Yes, I do."
- CD My son is wrapped right up into it. In B.C. we have the Aboriginal Youth Program. I don't know if you have it here. It starts in grade eight and goes right through to grade twelve. It doesn't matter if you have any native ancestry or not, it helps if you do. And Dave, he belonged to it for all of high school. He travelled to Ottawa and had a speech on anti-racism because of what he found out and the stories that we told him, you know, hiding your heritage and stuff like that, and it gets you nowhere. My son is really involved with it and loves this history. Mind you, he has watched me for how many years.
- VM (whispering) 12. You know your mother and my younger brother, Norman, they kept the native part out of their lives. My brother, Ira, who is next to me, he talks about it a

lot. Ira used to have that Jim Ferguson, when Jim came to Vancouver to work on different projects and whatnot, he used to stay with my brother and his wife, and they would see Jim quite a bit. I think the last time I saw Jim Ferguson was in Spirit River.

MN How many years ago was that?

VM Oh, that would be in the early 50s.

CD I can remember him coming to stay with us in the house on 29th. He was a big man.

VM Big man.

CD But of course I was a little girl so maybe he wasn't that big but my two uncles were six foot seven and six foot eight.

VM Norman and Ira? Norman was six-six, and Ira was six-five. And Norman used to weigh quite a bit but when he died he was about one hundred and eleven pounds.

CD One hundred and eleven pounds

MN There are a number of photographs of Mary's teenage years. Did she talk about her friends and activities when she was a teenager?

VM The women, yes, and some of her old boyfriends. And I can remember my mother telling me how they used to go to different towns I can remember mom talking about all these different places. Where they would go to dances at Sexsmith, Debolt...

MN Debolt, Dunvegan

VM Dunvegan and of course, Grande Prairie... Blueberry Hill...

MN Okay.

VM In the wintertime they would go in sleighs, horse and sleigh, and they had these fur rugs in the sleigh. I think her later teenage years and whatnot before she got married were the best. I think those were the better years for my mother when she got out to go to work and learn different things for herself. I think those were better years.

MN But some of her friends remained friends, right through her life, right until the very end, like Liz LeClerc. Was there anyone else?

CD Mat Ferguson and Jim Ferguson, they kept in touch and I still keep in touch with Mat's daughter. Who else? There was somebody else – oh, Jean McPherson...

VM Stella, not so much Stella because she couldn't get around. She was paralyzed a bit, but Jean McPherson.

CD There was somebody else... I can't think of her name right now but I might later.

MN Mary married Tom Davis in 1930. What can you tell me about him?

VM I don't remember too much about my dad in my childhood. Honestly I don't. I know he was there and then he was gone, and he used to go out and get hay. Actually, I can't remember too much about dad when I was young. I know we were always, always with my mother until we moved to Edmonton. I don't know why we moved to Edmonton. I have no idea.

MN You moved to Edmonton after the war?

VM No, before the war.

MN Before the war?

VM We moved to Edmonton in the late 30s, during the depression, I guess. When we moved to Edmonton my dad got a job, my dad was drinking – how much, I don't know. My mother had to put my sister and me in a place called the O'Connell Institute in Edmonton, a convent. It was run by the nuns. My brother Ira went into a boy's home called St. Mary's. I didn't know at that time that my mother was pregnant with my youngest brother Norman, and she worked for the gas company in Edmonton. She worked there right up until the time Norman was born. And then I can't remember too much, I know she took my sister out of the convent, and she left me in there, and I was sure she hated me then, because she left me there.

MN So when did you get out of the convent?

VM I can't remember when I got out.

MN But that's where you went to school?

VM Part of my education was in there but I can't remember much else. Every night when I went to bed I was sure I could smell my mother's purse. To me I could remember the smell of the perfume on my mother's purse and when I would go to bed at night I would think that I could smell my mother's purse. I don't know why.

CD You were homesick.

MN What stories did your mother tell you, Cindy, about being in the convent?

CD I didn't know anything about it until after my mom passed away.

VM Cindy was just a little tot then. As I was going to say, we moved from Grande Prairie to Edmonton in the late 30s. So Evie would just have been a little tot.

MN And you were only six or seven years old, so Evie would have been just very little. So what happened to Tom and Mary after that? Did they get back together?

VM Oh yeah, they were together in Edmonton and got different jobs and whatnot, then all of a sudden the war came and my dad was gone. The place that we were living at, which was H.M.E. Evans, we had to move away from because there was nothing for my mother to do at first. I can't even remember where we moved to from there. We did live in Edmonton. My mother raised the family by herself. My dad was gone for six years. There were always different little places, apartments, we were in, wherever mom could find something for work. And then when my dad went into the Army that's what she lived on, the army pay.

MN The Army pay?

VM I can remember when we lived in Edmonton and it wasn't too far from the downtown core, near Woodwards and Eatons. My mother used to get a cheque every month for \$77.00, and I don't know what she paid in rent. I can remember my mother going down to Eatons one time and Woodwards one time, and boxes and boxes of groceries that she would get grocery shopping... all this food that would come... and then I always keep a little money on the side. My mother did a lot of baking for us kids, always to buy milk. I can't remember if we had beef every day. I know we ate a lot of rice. I think my mother must have made a lot of bannock in those days. We were never skinny, none of us were underfed.

MN Your grandmother, Cindy, you said she lived with you until she passed away. When did she pass away?

CD 1973? When did Darcey die, 1971? When did your daughter die, 1971?

VM My daughter died in October 1970, my mother died in October 1972.

MN So how old were you then, Cindy?

CD I was ten.

MN So you remember her fairly well?

CD Oh yes.

MN What was she like in her later years?

CD (hesitating) I didn't have a good history with my grandma, I was not her favourite grandchild, not by a long shot. Louise, my sister, was her pet. I shouldn't talk of the things that I remember. I have horrible memories of my grandmother, although one thing that I will always carry with me is that my mom's and my grandmother's relationship was always amazing, and my relationship with my mom was just the same. My grandmother had a good sense of humour and she used to pick on my mom about smoking all the time. And then one day I came out of the bedroom and walked down

the hallway and there was my grandmother having a cigarette. I didn't dare say anything. She was a good person, and I know she was a good person, but I think the way her life went is why she was a little cruel on occasion, and she could be very cruel on occasion, but...

MN Probably was mild compared to what she had received.

CD I wouldn't doubt it.

VM Everything was fine with my mother, up until my daughter got sick. Darcey got sick in the early part of the 70s. She died of cancer – my daughter died of bone cancer. When Darcey took sick she was in the hospital and she had to have her leg amputated, my mother took sick and she wound up with pneumonia. Remember she went into the hospital? But she'd stayed in the hospital for so long and then she just said to the doctors, I am not staying here any longer, I have to get out of here, and she did. And then Darcey got out of the hospital and had to spend another month in Vancouver because part of her rehabilitation was that she had to learn to walk. You met Terry Fox in Edmonton or Vancouver. My daughter died of the same disease. That leg that he walked across Canada with was the same type of leg that she had to learn to walk with, and she had to take part in this, and she would go to school with Cindy for a month. Then we went back and lived in Campbell River. And then we had to come back; she started breaking out in different areas and lumps. We came back to Vancouver and that was the end of everything then; my marriage, he was just an alcoholic anyway by then. She passed away in October of 1970 and then my mother just went downhill.

MN It was Mary who preserved these photographs. Can you think why she would have saved them and why they would have been so important to her?

CD The original tin box that had the photos in it was Betsy's. Apparently when her estate was all settled Jim Ferguson sent that box down. My grandma had a big trunk, I have it now. What do you call those trunks?

MN A steamer trunk?

CD A steamer trunk, yeah. I guess my mom and I went down into the basement when grandma was still alive. It was not too long after that she passed away, though. We looked in there to see what was in there and we found the picture box and we brought it up and all three of us sat at the kitchen table and looked at it. So it started out being Betsy's box and I guess my grandmother would throw in a few pictures every now and again. I don't why she would have. These are the questions that I will never have answered. If she was hiding her heritage for so many years, why would she have held on to it?

- VM She kept all of those pictures. They all come from my mother.
- CD That's another thing too; I have dried deer hide and dried horse tail from where Betsy used to make moccasins. I have the little holders and the kit that she had.
- MN So she realized the importance of them even if she didn't want to talk about them. She still knew they were important.
- CD Yeah, I imagine so.
- VM She never talked much about her heritage. I can remember her telling me the different things, like working at the Donald Hotel and going to the different outings like the dances and the picnics and all these different things.
- MN So she worked in the Donald Hotel before she was married but not after?
- VM That I couldn't tell you. I don't know. I doubt it very much because as you can see, I have it marked down here that they were married in 1930. November 13th and it was a Friday, I know my mother told me that, and I was born at the end of December, a little early. She was a little pregnant then.
- MN I think that wraps it up here. Is there anything that we have missed that you would like to say about your mother or your grandmother?
- VM I think that about covers it all.
- CD I wish they were back so we could ask them all these questions.
- MN Thank you very much.
- CD Thank you.

*Transcribed by Grace Wallace
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