



DOCTRINES &  
DISCOVERIES

AN MCC PODCAST



## S1E2. Round Prairie Métis Cemetery: A visit with Cort Dogniez

### Intro (Cort Dogniez):

“And that’s kind of the story of the Métis: that oftentimes we’re chased off as settlers came onto this land. And that’s the whole reason why there was a Northwest Resistance, was the Métis were established in Batoche, but didn’t have title to the land, and you had these newcomers who were arriving on their land and saying, you know, this is our land because we have title. And the Métis were saying, okay, so we don’t? So, they petition the government. You know, I can’t remember the number, but I know it was over 80 petitions that went to the federal government asking for recognition of their land that they never got.”

*[music]*

### Host (Randy Klassen):

This is *Doctrines & Discoveries*, the podcast that takes you to sites across Saskatchewan to listen to great stories and hard truths, as told by Indigenous knowledge keepers. I’m your host, Randy Klassen.

Today we’re taking a trip to the Round Prairie Métis cemetery, about a half hour drive south of Saskatoon. It’s a peaceful site, a small graveyard overlooking a panoramic vista of the South Saskatchewan River. But overall, the locale gives no hint of its importance as one of central Saskatchewan’s earliest Métis settlements.

My guest today is Cort Dogniez. Cort is a proud Métis knowledge keeper, born and raised in Saskatoon. He’s had a 40 plus year career as a classroom teacher and education administrator, and his ongoing passion is Métis storytelling. He recently published his second book of children’s stories based on his own family’s experiences, including life at Round Prairie. On this rather windy day, I started by asking Cort to describe where we’re standing.

### Cort Dogniez:

So this is a site that is located right off of Highway 219, just south of Whitecap Dakota First Nation. It’s right on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. So as we stand here, there are two significant sites that are here. One is the cemetery, that is, a historic cemetery that is protected, that was used by the Métis people of this community. And then there’s a little church that’s up here on this hill that was built in 2010 for commemoration of the Year of the Métis. So, very beautiful river valley that we can look at. There’s farmland all around us, and a big gravel pit just over here that we can see clearly, from this site.

### Host:

*It’s beautiful, but also very sparse. I was really curious what it would have looked like 100 or 150 years ago.*

**Cort:**

So, there were a number of families that had come from the Red River area as buffalo hunters. And they came here to this site as a wintering ground, because this is where the buffalo would have been. And so they camped here, and then would go back to Red River. And there were about 30 families. And my relatives, my fourth great grandfather Isidore Dumont, married into the Laframboise family, and that was a huge part of the brigade that came and originally just camped here, and then eventually, in the [18]50s, decided to establish a village and just stay here. So 30 families in all, but there were three sisters, and they were Laframboise sisters, and they married Trotchies and Landries. And so it was actually the women who bound them together. And even my great grandfather married Louise Laframboise, who was the auntie of those three sisters. So that's kind of what tied everybody together here.

The leader of the brigade was Charles Trotchie<sup>1</sup>, and so he's the one that would lead them out here, started this community, and then in 1885 they also became a part of the Northwest Resistance. So because we're relatives, and had alliances between this community and Batoche, Saint Laurent, the Métis felt obligated to participate, and so they fought in the Battle of Fish Creek.

But after the Resistance, they were scared for their lives. We were considered traitors and rebels. And so the Métis left, and we all went to the States. So this particular community went to Montana, and they stayed there until 1903 and then they came back and actually acquired land title to this land.

And so they were hoping to farm it; before, they used it just for, mainly for hunting. And so when they set up their farms, this land actually is pretty rocky and it's very sandy, and so it really wasn't good for farming. So even though there was communities, and particularly—I'm just trying to think, I don't know what direction that is... (*north, that's, I think that's north, yeah*) is that North?—So they would have had land that way as well, so on the other side of the highway as well, and towards Whitecap.

So they found it difficult to farm. And so what they did was all the menial jobs that could get done. So they would clear land, they would cut timber for fence posts, for firewood, they would pick rocks, all of those kinds of things. But eventually they realized that there wasn't enough to keep them here, and so in the 1930s they started leaving, so that by the '50s, they were gone. They were all mainly in Saskatoon on the road allowance there.

**Host:**

*I was trying to envision the earliest community there. Did they live in teepees or tents? Or how would they have lived there?*

**Cort:**

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<sup>1</sup> also "Trottier."

So they would have used teepees. They would have used canvas prospector tents. That's the sort of thing that they would have been using. They would have built temporary shelters out of wood, out of logs. So, you'd have seen log houses. They would have been small because they were only seen as temporary structures.

*—Okay, and then... is that also into the 1850s, just small log cabins then, or...?*

Yeah, and then once, once they established a permanent community, then you would build houses. And one of the things that they did was to make this a community, they built a church, and they petitioned the diocese to have a priest come here, because that's what founds a community. And the Métis that came from Red River here were French Catholic. And so religion was a huge part of their way of life. And so they were adamant that they needed to have a church, and then eventually a school that was built out here to make it a proper community.

*—So that was all around here?...*

All around here, and that way as well.

*—Okay. And there doesn't seem to be, like, apart from this cemetery there doesn't seem to be any physical evidence of that, or has it just not been investigated?*

No, it's mainly gone. I think because they were wood structures without foundations. There's no foundations to find. I know that the Métis community in Saskatoon has done extensive work here trying to locate artifacts, that sort of thing, and they'll continue to do that. But yeah, when you come out here right now, it's just bare.

**Host:**

*It seems to me that even though there may not be any visible foundations left to mark this community, there are still many invisible and spiritual bonds that hold it together. I asked Cort to share a bit more about his own family stories that tie him to this place.*

**Cort:**

Yeah, it's actually funny. I recorded my grandmother, Clara Delorme. Her maiden name was Dumont, and when I was recording her, she was telling me stories about this land. But my kohkom never used the term Round Prairie. She always said, "near Dundurn." So Dundurn is over there, and she would say "near Dundurn." And I didn't know that. And she would tell me their stories of how they lived in a prospector's tent here on this land. So they didn't have any land title. They were just squatting on this land, and were part of the community in that regard. She said they were very, very poor.

She would talk about the relationship between this community of Round Prairie and Whitecap Dakota First Nation. So there was a longstanding relationship between the Métis and the Dakota people. And she would tell me that they would go to Whitecap for Christmas celebrations. So that's where they would go, not here. So for the Métis, their big celebration is New Year's. And so for Christmas, it was very low key, because they were poor, they would get fruit and maybe some nuts and that sort of thing in their stockings.

That was it. But they would go to Whitecap because then there would be a feast, and then they would have lots of food. So a good relationship between them. And my kohkum would tell me that, because of her relationship here, when she became a cook in the sanatorium in Saskatoon, and Whitecap elders would become patients there, she would sneak them bannock to cook for them, because she knew them, and she knew that they were lonely and just needed something from home. So she would make them bannock and bring it to them. Yeah. So good relationships out here.

The funny thing— when a friend of mine was talking about Round Prairie as a Métis community, she said, Oh, and your grandma was out there. And I said, No, she wasn't at Round Prairie, she was "near Dundurn." And she said, No, she was at Round Prairie! And I said, No, I don't think so. And she said, Well, I know so, because I have pictures! And she showed me a picture of my grandma with her brothers and sisters on this land, and it was like, oh my goodness, I didn't realize that when she was talking about "near Dundurn," she was talking about Round Prairie.

**Host:**

*I was curious. Why didn't she use that name "Round Prairie"? But also, what is the origin of that name itself?*

**Cort:**

You know, I don't know. I don't know why she wouldn't say that. Yeah, I have no idea.

*—Like, why would this be named Round Prairie?*

No, I don't know that. I know that they would have called it *La Prairie Ronde* when... back in the day, because they would have spoken Michif, and a large portion of that is French, and so they it would have a French name. But, yeah, I have no idea. I don't know if anybody's ever told me.

**Host:**

*I feel like I'm just beginning to learn the story of the Métis. I've heard of the Red River settlement and Batoche, but I was wondering how to place Round Prairie in the larger story of the Métis Nation.*

**Cort:**

So as the Métis were moving westward, looking for more buffalo, as buffalo were becoming scarcer, they'd have to travel further and further from Red River, and then eventually just realized, why are we going back? And so Round Prairie would have been established in the 1850s and probably was one of the larger Métis settlements in this area. But as Métis were moving and leaving the Red River, then they were starting to move even further north, further west, and so that's where you have communities like Saint Laurent, Batoche, Saint Louis, La Petite Ville, all of these Métis communities, as Métis people were looking for land to kind of establish a new lifestyle here in Saskatchewan.

By 1870 there was hard times in the Red River area, because the Hudson Bay Company had sold Rupert's Land to the government and had not consulted First Nations or Métis people.

And Louis Riel, at that time, created that Provisional Government and petitioned for the establishment of the Province of Manitoba. That happened, but then the government sent in government troops. And so there were years of what's called the "reign of terror," where those government troops persecuted the Métis people, where there was no protection for the Métis people. And so there were tons of murders, rapes, theft, all that sort of thing. And the Métis scattered all over the place, and they, a lot of them, came this, this direction. And so you have Métis people trying to start a new life here in Saskatchewan. But those communities that you just said, like Batoche, are well known communities because they were larger communities that were established, but many up in the north as well. Île-à-la-Crosse, Green Lake, those are all Métis communities as well, with connections to Red River.

**Host:**

*I'd once heard Cort talk about the connection between Round Prairie and the founding of Saskatoon. That's a story we don't usually hear. I wanted to know more.*

**Cort:**

So the Métis again, because they were moving across the prairies, moving towards Batoche and everything, that land between Batoche and Round Prairie was Métis hunting ground. So oftentimes the Métis were in that area that is now Saskatoon. They called it "Bwaa di Flaysh"<sup>2</sup>, and they had river lots where the Métis were living in Saskatoon area, long before John Lake arrived. And in fact, when Whitecap was looking for land to settle, it was Round Prairie Métis who recommended the Whitecap area to Whitecap himself. So there was that relationship that was already in existence. And then you have Métis people moving from Round Prairie to Batoche and back again. So this is quite the throughfare for Métis people.

And then when John Lake established his community, and they started to create a village, well, then the Métis were just forced off that land and chased off. And kind of, that's it, that's kind of the story of the Métis that oftentimes were chased off as settlers came on to this land. And that's the whole reason why there was a Northwest Resistance, was the Métis were established in Batoche, but didn't have title to the land, and you had these newcomers who were arriving on their land and saying, you know, this is our land because we have title. And the Métis were saying, okay, so we don't? So they petition the government. You know, I can't remember the number, but I know it was over 80 petitions that went to the federal government asking for recognition of their land that they never got.

And so the Métis are getting frustrated that people are coming onto their land. There's the threat of losing their land, and they have no recourse, because they don't have that piece of paper, and they're asking for it, and they're just ignored. And so eventually they resist, and they push back to defend their rights to the land. You know, they have inherent rights that were not respected. And so they fought for that land, and of course, we lost.

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<sup>2</sup> French "Bois de flèche," or Arrow Woods.

And so then you have this history of us being scattered again. And we travel north. We travel further west. Many down in the south went into the States and stayed in the States. But from that time of 1885 probably until the 1960s the Métis are thought of as the forgotten people, because our rights aren't recognized. So Métis people just have to cope with the racism that's out there.

So for my family, my family left Batoche after the Resistance, went to Onion Lake, and through the land grant system, so not even through scrip anymore, they get actual land through the Dominion land grants. They get land. They settle that land, but because they're poor, they owe taxes, and because they owe taxes, it's easy to get them off the land, and so they're chased off their land. Are other settlers chased off their land? No, but Métis people. [They] get rid of them, push them out, don't let them be a part of the education system, so that they grow up not only poor, but illiterate. And now for my family, they're chased off their land. They wind up back living in a prospector's tent all year round, and eventually, you know, make their way back to Round Prairie. Are here for a while, and then as everybody moves into Saskatoon, so do they, and that's what my family did.

And then when they got there on the east side of Saskatoon, that's where they did exactly what they did here: picked rocks, worked for farmers in any way, shape or form, created gardens to try and grow some vegetables, that sort of thing, to maintain themselves. But eventually moved into the city to get jobs, housing, that sort of thing. That was the Métis people. But up until the 1960s we didn't have a political voice that was sticking up for us in terms of our inherent rights. That didn't happen until the 60s, when there was way more activism.

**Host:**

*One of the things that I'm struck by over and over in Cort's words, is the Métis experience of being invisible, or worse, being erased.*

*—It seems to me, what you something you said earlier about, you know, like..., can we see anything more than just the cemetery? And you said, well, there would have been houses, but no foundations. And so it's just, it's all erased. And it seems to me that that just is a strong and tragic metaphor for, you know, what has happened, what did happen to the Métis people for such a long time. And I mean it sounds now like, I mean, there's a lot of resurgence, yeah, and reassertion of Métis presence and Métis rights and Métis voice. But that sense of being erased....*

**Cort:**

Well, for Métis people, because racism was so prevalent in those days, you had Métis people who kind of went undercover. So they passed themselves off as French, they passed themselves off as Italian, Spanish, anything to explain why they would have a darker complexion, but the idea being that we'll get to be a part of society in terms of education and jobs if we just deny who we are, so don't speak the language, try and fly under the radar. And they did that for many, many years. There were, there were obviously people who couldn't because of their physical features, where they couldn't hide and had to suffer the abuse that was out there.

But luckily, nowadays we have a time where there's this renewal in Métis pride, where we have organizations now who are advocating for our rights. And in Saskatoon, like you have three Métis locals now who are advocating for their people in terms of education and health, economic development, all of those sorts of things. And culture. Like, culture is a huge part of that reclaiming in terms of our pride of who we are. You need those opportunities, because maybe you didn't get the stories. I'm lucky. I got the stories from my kohkom, but there are so many that did not. They don't have those stories, and yet they feel like there's a hole in their heart that needs to be filled. And so that's what we need to be doing as a community is building people up, helping them with their language, help them with their identity, help them with their history and their perspectives, so that they can reclaim that and be proud of who they are.

**Host:**

*I'm getting a clearer sense of the Métis story rooted in this place called round prairie. It reminds me of what I've heard, but rarely thought about in the practice of treaty land acknowledgements. It's that final phrase: "...and the homeland of the Métis." I haven't thought about that as much as I've thought about the dimension of treaty relationships. I asked Cort about that.*

**Cort:**

So that's... awesome. I like land acknowledgements because it's a starting point, and we all need starting points. But that can't be the be all and the end all. The idea is that we want to be culturally aware, for sure, but we want to be culturally responsive. So if I'm making a land acknowledgement, and I'm recognizing that this was originally the homeland of the Métis, you know, that extends from Ontario all the way to BC and up into the Northwest Territories and down into the United States, we were sharing this land, you know, with our Indigenous brothers and sisters, our First Nations brothers and sisters, sharing that land, and now we're sharing that land with settlers. So, acknowledging that this land was ours to begin with, we're sharing that land, it's now a question of, how do we share it in an equitable, knowledgeable way?

So, for so long, we've had a kind of a, very much a Eurocentric education and all of this history is forgotten, so we get kind of little tidbits about it. We learn about the Northwest Resistance and Batoche, but that's it. We don't know who Métis people are, and so because it wasn't a part of our schooling, we think it's not important. And *that's* the problem. So, a land acknowledgement gives us a starting point, but it should also be, if I'm acknowledging this land, it's understanding my relationship with that land too, and my relationship with those people, and how do I develop that relationship so that it's a healthy one?

**Host:**

*As we wound down our visit to this site, I asked Cort if he had any reflections or encouragements for people who want to grow in their understanding of Métis life and history?*

**Cort:**

That's a good question, and it's a big question. So when I think about this, I think of opportunities. So, I mentioned again about being culturally responsive. And so it's a question of, what can I do that's going to gain me a better understanding and appreciation for these people? And so, we're so lucky in Saskatoon that there are so many different celebrations that happen, and we need to know that we're welcome to go to them. So, you know, we have Back to Batoche that happens every July, and it's that opportunity for everybody to go there and be a part of those celebrations.

Right now, in our schools, we have kids who are learning about Métis people, you know, and they're coming home with that that knowledge, and we need to be open to that learning, because our kids are gaining it, but we're still a generation that's behind. We don't know these things. And so, it's our opportunity to gain that, so go to the celebrations that are happening in the city, whether it's Orange Shirt Day, whether it's National Indigenous Peoples Day, like this is Indigenous Peoples Month<sup>3</sup>. There are so many opportunities to learn about our Indigenous people in this province, but in our own community, and learning our history. So go to those events, pick up a few books, read just to learn more. There's a great book out there called *The Northwest is Our Mother*, by Jean Teillet. It is a brilliant book that gives those perspectives that we didn't know.

We were talking on the way here, how people often say, you know, they see the discrepancies between Indigenous people and settlers, and say, You know, we all had the same opportunities, so we should all be gaining. How come, you know, First Nations and Métis people aren't? —and it's because they don't, we don't know our history. We don't realize that it was not a level playing field. That for First Nations people, they were incarcerated on their reserves, they had an Indian Act that oppressed them significantly, trying to steal from them their culture, their language, their identity. But for Métis people you know, after the Resistance, what were we but oppressed people? You know, not being recognized at all. We didn't have the same opportunities as everybody else, but we make those assumptions that everybody had the same and that's where we need to learn. We need to move forward by gaining those perspectives, being empathetic. I don't need your sympathy, but I do need your understanding, because that's how we're going to move forward in a positive way.

[music]

**Host:**

You've been listening to ***Doctrines & Discoveries***, a production of MCC Saskatchewan Indigenous Neighbours program.

A big thank you to **Cort Dogniez** for sharing traditional knowledge, local history, and important insights. Proper protocol was followed for the sharing of these truths.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian celebrations/commemorations: Orange Shirt Day, also National Truth & Reconciliation Day, September 30; National Indigenous Peoples Day, June 21; National Indigenous History Month, June.



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For more information on this podcast project, including travel directions to the sites, discussion guides, and suggestions for next steps, follow the link in the podcast description. I'm Randy Klassen. Thanks for listening.