

INTERVIEW WITH ADOLPH MERCREDI

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BY: J. Overvold

Jo: Let's start by getting you to give me part of your family tree. Your father's name was Victor?

Adolph: Yes, my mother's name was Elizabeth Mandeville before she was married. We had 9 children in all, twin brothers born in 1909 or 1910 and I had a sister born in 1912 her name was Therese then I was born in 1914, 2 yrs after I had a brother born by the name of Norbert and another 2 yrs a sister Angelina, then 1921 another sister, Agnes; then in 1922, Xavier; and another little brother after him in 1930 but he only lived 1 year. Of all this group of children there's only myself and my sister Mrs. Angelina Bourke and X Mercredi.

Jo: Where does Angelina live?

Adolph: She's now in Edmonton, she was here for a time and they've been rolling around in McMurray, back to YK, moved to BC. I don't remember the names of the town that they lived in. Then they lived in Grande Prairie for a few years and right now they're in Edmonton.

Jo: Your grandfather's name on your father's side is Pierre Mercredi?

Adolph: Yes.

Jo: Who's your grandfather on your mother's side?

Adolph: Michel Mandeville.

Jo: And your grandmother?

Adolph: I believe, Marie Fabien, I think Marie was her first name but Fabien was her last name.

Jo: so, you were born in 1914 in Fort Chipewyan?

Adolph: Right.

JO: Your wife's name is Martha?

Adolph: Yes, she was Martha Swain before I married her, she comes from not Fort Chipewyan but a place called Bombez (?). I met her she was sent to the 'Holy Angels Convent' it was an orphanage and also a Catholice School run by the Grey Nuns. She was sent there by her grandmother when her mother died.

Jo: How old were you then?

Martha; 4 yrs old.

Jo: What were your parents names?

Martha: My mother was Louise Cardinal and my father was Swain, Johnny.

Jo: So, you grew up in the Convent?

Martha; I was 4 when I went into the Convent and I left when I was 18 yrs old.

Jo: How many children did you have?

Martha: 5, 3 girls - Louise, Josey, and Evy and Bill and Nicolas. Just Evy was born in Fort Smith, N.W.T. and the rest in Fort Chipewyan.

Jo: Did you live in Fort chipewyan most of your life?

Adolph: Most of my life, that's why I do know some of the history. My mother stayed there for around 15 years without moving away except going to Fondu Lac.

Jo: Did your father work for the Bay?

Adolph: Not too much, he worked for the opposition for Charlie Largent, free traders in his pre-twenties. Then after that he hired on with Lumson & Hubbard, an American outfit, they were buying furs and general merchant with the trappers. For awhile he worked in Jackfish Lake a few miles from Fort Chipewyan and then he was transferred to FonduLac in Sask and he worked from 1921-23 and then the Company amalgamated, the HBC bought them out and Lumson & Hubbard were finished right there.

Jo: Did he work for Heslop & Nagle?

Adolph: Oh, no, he knew them well from Resolution just before he married my

mother from Resolution and after they got married they stayed one year in Resolution and then he came back home to Fort Chipewyan. He spent all his life there.

Jo: Was he born there too?

Adolph: Yes, my mother was born in Fort Resolution.

Jo: Where was Pierre born?

Adolph: That I'm not sure, maybe Pondulac but probably Fort Chipewyan.

Jo: What year was your father born?

Adolph: 1885 probably, January the 20th and my mother was 2 yrs younger than dad.

Jo: What's been your major occupation?

Adolph: Just general labourer.

Jo: You said you worked as a carpenter.

Adolph: Yes, wood working, building houses and a little cabin building. I did a lot of wood working.

Jo: Did you ever do any trapping?

Adolph: I tried but I wasn't successful so I had to do something to earn my bread and butter. I started working with any job I could get but I was definitely not the good trapper, I didn't know the tricks of the trade.

Jo: How old were you when you started trapping?

Adolph: I started young, listening to how it should be done but it didn't work out so good. So, after I got out of the Convent in 1926 that's when I tried my hand in trapping and caught only a few weasels. That's the only time I did trap was in the fall before the snow got deep and I stayed in the settlement all that winter. And then after that then I started to work a little bit, there was not too much going on in Chip. The Depression was going strong in the 30's and there wasn't much trapping going on but selling wood or fuel. It was at a very reasonable price, \$6 cord, that was cut in the bush and then

after awhile they wanted the wood delivered. We just made 3 meals a day and that didn't last all the way around just for awhile.

Jo: You said you had a tape that your father had done.

Adolph: Well, it's very interesting for someone that understands French. But for one that doesn't understand it wouldn't be. It upset me when I first heard it, my dad had died a few years before I heard this tape, it was done by Brother Saroo in Fort Smith and he told me if I would be interested in listening to a tape of my father's voice. I wasn't too keen on it but I did expect that it would affect me some how after he died. He brought the tape over and he started to play it and I could cry knowing that he was dead and his voice seemed that he was right among us. But I got over it and I listened it, it was something to remember him by. But I won't listen to it too often and maybe my children or my grandchildren will like to hear the voice of their grandfather.

Jo: What kind of things does he talk about?

Adolph: He talks about his young days working in Chip.

Jo: I bet he's got some very interesting stories.

Adolph: Yeah, but I don't want to say too much. I cannot bring those stories back, it's quite a few years since I heard it but my wife has played it over for our children and daughters. We'll keep it as long as we last.

Jo: Did your father speak French most of the time?

Adolph: Yes, mostly, he could speak the country foreign but not as fluently as it could have been done but he could speak Cree and Chip and French and English. My mother could speak fluent Chipewyan - I used to speak my own language Chip and French but after the Convent we were not very encouraged to carry on our language and we spoke French. So when I parted in the early 20's there wasn't too much English maybe 2 hours a day.

Jo: How long did you stay in the Convent?

Adolph: About 4 years, I went in at 1920 and in the summer of 21, my dad was transferred to Fondulac and they took me out with them. At that time there

was the smallpox and we saw many Indians die of it in 1921. I went to Fondulac and I caught the sickness and on the way I was fevered up and I arrived to Fondulac and with this disease. There was the Father there, Father Reeo (?) and he warned the Indians not to get too close to me or they would get sick if they catch that disease and probably die. So, they feared me more than they feared the devil. But they were the lucky one and I was the only unlucky one. But all the family had been vaccinated except me and it broke out about 4 days before we went to Chip.

Jo: That must have been awful with all the people dying?

Adolph: Yes, many old timers I remember all the winter of 21 and 22, then when I got to Chip in the spring, the flu came out they used to call it the Spanish Flu and many people died at that time. That would be April and May of 1922. There's so many things that can be said about this but I'm not prepared for it.

Well, the first one, one of them it was for Giant Mines that happened in 1948, it was nothing major but we didn't know what was going on. We were sent underground to build a battery station on the 3rd level and there was a well known man by the name of Joe Bang. He was our foreman and he brought us down to the 3rd level which is now the D Shaft. As we were timbering we were supposed to build a waterproof covering for the batteries and we wore our hard hats. And they had sunk the shaft in the month of December in the fall of 47, they sunk it about 300 ft from the level we were working at. And they told us they were going to start using the skip and that thing was all planked over and old Frank Lipke, and another one had opened this to remove the planking and the timbers, warned us that they were going to use this part of the shaft for the first time today so just be prepared in case something might be jammed. And myself I didn't know what could happen and we were in this little station a little platform, a notch in the rock, so to speak. All at once they started to lower the skip and it got stuck right at the level we were working at. And

the slack of the cable sort of coiled around this little space and started to go down the shaft in between the bucket and the timbers. So, this partner of mine, Tremblay who was French. Anyway, he was pulling the slack out of the hole and I told him don't touch it in case something let's go and gets caught into something. I just finished saying that when the vibration of the cage on the other side shook this thing loose and it took off like a gun shot and the bucket went. How much slack was there I didn't know. And I thought something was going to happen so I huddled in a corner to get away from any flying timber and it got to the end of the slack and I felt a thud and everything stopped. Well we were so surprised this big cable picked up a 6X6 timber about 10 ft long and flung it against the wall and the cable cut that in two in one snap. So, here we are and we don't know what's going on we're about 300 ft down and it's another 300 to the summit. This is where we were going to work. We saw the cage and a few minutes later the cage went right down to the bottom and we didn't know what to do so Joe Bang he tried to climb the ladder and walk up to the surface. In the mean time the cage tender he thought the cage was dropping freely and he got a bit worried, he told me that later. So, when he got to the bottom right to the summit and he jumped out of the cage and rang the cage up to the surface and he wrote a message on a cigarette box asking what the cage tender on the surface to ask what's going on. In the meantime everything was silent and we were sort of in shock - so Joe Bang decided to climb to the top and me and my partner stayed there. Not long after that we heard voices coming from the ladders and we thought it would be Joe and others and at that moment the cage was right there about 10 ft on top of us and here the miners came down and they questioned us what happened and we just told them what we saw. They looked at things and signaled and it worked they went to the surface, we didn't know, something could have happened very seriously. The cage came down after the guys went back up and they went and

checked the cage tender, Fed Lipke, and when they saw he was also wondering what was going on, when he went up it only went half way up and then the cage went by right to the surface and then we thought something must be wrong. And then we heard the cage shaking again and here comes the cage tender and he was upset shaking quite a bit. We couldn't work and we all went up, I was supposed to be timbering after that but my little girl was sick and she was in the old Stanton Hospital and shortly after she died. And I quit working there mostly on ground and with carpenters. So that was a close call.

Another time I was working on the waterways which is at the end of the steel where we loaded the NT. I was a deck-hand on the Uranium Queen and our Captain was John Kinley and we were all set to cast off to go to Fitzgerald with a load of cargo freight and we went to town and got a bunch of things we might need, cigarettes, chocolate bars. And we came down this ramp where they could drive a truck onto the barge. And they could raise the arms to the barge but at that time the Uranium Queen was burning wood and there wasn't any thing such as oil. So we had to bring on a cord of wood on the ramp and we were on the overhang and the ramp was springing up and down and one arm gave way, the timbers that were holding it slipped off. And the pile of wood right behind us went rolling down plus this truck. They had dredged the river bank fortunately and I happened to hit the deepest part into the clear part of the river and I crawled my way along the barge and I found this knuckle piece and I tried to step onto this little bank I was underwater and just as I was about half way out of the water covered with mud and water, this piece of bank gave way and down again. This time I didn't let go of this piece I had a hold of and I shot out of there for a breath of air. Before I knew it Len McKinley was there and he grabbed me by the overalls and pulled me out of there. But nothing worse happened but to get a good soaking and mud.

SIDE TWO

Jo: YOU were telling me before Martha that old Pierre Mercredi, Adolph's grandfather was a very kind person and very generous.

Martha: Yes, very charitable.

Adolph: Very helpful.

Martha; Yes, you just have to see them, they're special you know, you could talk to him like a grandfather. I really loved him. But granny was different but I don't know how compared to grandfather but she was more with Adolph. But he was a very nice man, he's a person that you won't forget.

Adolph: He always had a very nice garden, old as he was he would be weeding, cultivating and doing something everyday. He had a potato crop and some cabbage and carrots.

Jo: Was that in Chip?

Adolph Yeah.

Jo: Is that where he retired?

Adolph: Yes, he was pensioned off I guess when he worked in Fort Resolution. He arrived in Chipewyan in 1929 and he settle d there til he passed away and he built his home there.

Jo: He went there after he retired?

Adolph: Yes, he finished his days, he died in 1947 and I think Granny died in 1952.

Jo: He really respected the Bay didn't he?

Adolph: Oh yes, that was a really big thing.

JO: Was he disappointed when you didn't work for the Bay?

Adolph: Well, there wasn't too much he could do, he was too old. (laugh)

Jo: Well, what about Victor you dad?

Adolph: Yeah, well I'll tell you a story about him being so devout about the



Hudson Bay, it was the thing. At one time, before the migratory birds Act came. They were shooting ducks in the spring, I don't remember exactly what year it was, in Chip. It was in the pre-twenties. I just heard dad talk about this and at that time the people used to load their own shot gun shells. And dad tried to buy some from the Hudson Bay which my grandfather had been running and managing at the time. So, he went to see the old man and the old man says I'm sold out. But you know the local gossip with the trappers and hunters, they knew that old Colin Fraser which was the opposition for the Bay. He had some that was for sale that anyone would buy. So, dad went over there and bought the 25lb bag of shells and he had all the other stuff the walls (?) and powder and when the old man heard this he went to dad and asked him, why did he go and buy that, he could have waited and something could have happened, maybe wks and months or something from Edmonton would have come. Anyway, he didn't like that at all and he gave him a blast. So, the old man wanted to go hunting and nowhere else could he get some shells except to my dad and he came sheepishly and asked him if he could spare a half a lb and so of course, his dad said help yourself. You couldn't talk back to your dad those days.

Jo: Funny he didn't tease him.

Adolph: No, you didn't know or do that, he was a strict one. But he was a nice old man, a grand old gentleman. And another time there was somethings that we already had freight in the summer months but in the winter time the transportation was by dogs, the mail and everything that was heavy you couldn't haul by dog team. McMurray was OK because they were at the end of the steel and Chipewyan is about 180 miles further north and it was all dog team or horses that would bring the stuff but it didn't happen very often. Anyway, this time there was a shortage of some thing too, so my dad had trapped a few rats and he sold his rats to Charlie Largent, an independent small trader. So, he went up there and bought the stuff for the little rats

and the old man said, Why couldn't you come to the Bay and buy some of that stuff instead of giving that to the opposition. The old man didn't win that time, he still bought it from Largent.

Jo: How old was Pierre when he died?

Adolph: 87, I think.

Jo: Your grandmother must have been quite old.

Adolph: Yes, there was quite an age difference than the old man, I think she outlived the old man by about 7 years.

Jo: How are you related to Louie Mercredi?

Adolph: My father's cousin, Louie's dad was Joseph, he was the oldest of the generation and my grandfather Pierre I'm not sure if he was next to Joseph there was another brother there Xavier, I mix them up sometimes I don't know who was after Joseph.

Jo: Do you know your great grandparents names?

Adolph: You mean my grandfather's dad?

Jo: Yeah.

Adolph: Yeah, the old one was Joseph McCarthy, Mercredi .

Jo: Oh yeah, the Mercredi's name was originally McCarthy.

Adolph: Yes, that's in the registry of the RC Mission. There was no 'h' in the name, some of the old Fathers were saying that it was McCarthy with the 'h'.

The old Joseph McCarty's grave stone is in Pondulac, he was buried on a big sand hill and this stone was donated from the Hudson Bay for his many years of service, I don't know what year he died it was long before I was born.

But I saw his grave stone.

Jo: Was he born in Canada?

Adolph: I don't know that, I didn't read about his past, all I know is when he died, dad had seen his grandfather and I guess he died on his way back from Fondulac That's where the generation of my grandfather most of his brothers were born

there. That's the cradle for the Mercredi's. I saw the great grandmother, Joe's wife, she died in 1922 with that flu, the Spanish Flu, she was very old then. She was living with her son Germaine Mercredi.

Jo: Do you remember her name?

Adolph: As far as I can remember I think her name was Mary Charlotte and her maiden name was Laliverty (?) She came from Lacrosse. She spoke good Cree, I think she could speak both Chip and Cree.

Jo: She wasn't white then?

Adolph: no, I don't think so, she had blue eyes for one thing. Yeah, that's a long time.

Jo: Were the people in the olden days proud of their Indian blood?

Adolph: I don't know everybody was treated the same, although there was a little bit of a difference with the Cree and the Chipewyan. They weren't too friendly, it never turned into anything serious but they avoided each other as much as possible.

Jo: Do you remember any murders about Albert Laboe?

Adolph: I heard about it I was in Fondulac when the execution was in Fort Smith, I was just 7 yrs old, I don't know any details but I just heard that he was hung.

Jo: How about ghosts?

Adolph: I don't know, they sure told us about them.

Jo: Who's that?

Adolph: Oh, the oldtimers, they believed in ghosts and yet the other thing too they always believed in the undfriendly tribes. People would go around trying to scare the other group of people. There are some funny things that did happen 100 yrs or more ago.

Jo: You said you worked on which boat?

Adolph: The Radium Queen, it wasn't a big boat but the other ones from Fort

Smith were larger, the Uranium King.

Jo: What did you do on there?

Adolph: Deck hand.

Jo: Did you work on any other boats?

Adolph: No.

Jo: Did you know Johnny Berrens?

Adolph: Yes, I spoke to him, first time I met him was in 1932, I remember they were getting the 'Distributor' ready for the first trip down the MacKenzie, the first trip in the spring. And he was eagerly waiting to go down, go aboard the ship and pilot her down. I was just a young lad of 16 when I first saw Johnny Berrens.

Jo: What kind of a man was he?

Adolph: I didn't know him, I just saw him for a very short period of time on the boat for the summer and then I saw him on later years and the same thing happened and I understand that he worked quite a few years for the Hudson Bay. So, I would see him for a while and the boat would pull into Fort Smith and with his family. Just waited to go down the MacKenzie again and that's as much as I've seen him, not too much. I was mostly in Fort Chip mostly.

Jo: It used to be a pretty big place hey?

Adolph: It's bigger now, it was a settlement not too many people there was around 20 to 30 families mixed with white, Metis and Indians. But now everybody has moved in the settlement at that time the families would come in during the summer and stay in the community for a few weeks a holiday with their friends and they would go out again after the Treaty was paid. They would go out for a few weeks and come back by the 15 August, they were very religious for the special day on the 15th of August. They would come to Church for a few days and would go back into the busy and get ready for the winter. Make their cabins, weather proof, as warm as possible, gather fish and fire

wood. And then, they would stay there awhile again and just before freeze-up they would come in again and get some supplies to last them over freeze up and then they would bring their furs, trade was good, cash . The guys that worked hard made good, but some of them were not as lucky or not as ambitious or knowing how to go about it didn't do as good as the others.

Jo: Do you know how long your grandfather was in Resolution?

Adolph: No, I know he was in Fort Smith for awhile, I know he relieved some one in Fort Rae that was sick but I don't remember the years, I just heard him talk about it. I think he was at Fort McKay, posted there for a little while. I don't know about Fondulac, a lot of things I don't know.

Jo: What did your father do after?

Adolph: After he was laid off from Lumson & Hubbard he tried into trapping but he was no trapper and he would work in the stores, he used to speak the four languages, he was handy for that and he would interpret for the merchants him and the natives, the Indians, the customers. And after that, towards the last few years he handled the Post Office a few years and he worked a little bit with the Canadian Airways as an agent making out tickets to go to McMurray or Fort Smith. There was no main line, it was just the bush planes.

Jo: Did he ever work for the Police?

Adolph: Yes, he worked about a few months, maybe 9 months maybe less, I don't think he completed a year. He didn't like it, it was much like the RCMP, had to have an interpreter to speak the native language so he was there and he didn't like it. To him, you got to have no friends.

Jo: Was he ever involved in any case, a big case or anything.

Adolph: No, people were easy, theft was unknown, very little if any, minor things but break ins, there wasn't any. People used to leave their cabins wide open and people would respect that and they would use the house to stay

and it was the rule that if anybody uses firewood would replace it and leave it the way they found it. Most of the time it was like that. I remember people used to come into Chip with their skiffs, come ashore and leave everything in the boat all day and all night. Nobody would touch their things, they would have guns, tool boxes for their kickers, gas for the kicker, tents and tarps.

Jo: It must have been good living then hey?

Adolph: At that time it was that's why I don't want to go back to my home town people used to just mind their own business. Very few cases where people go to jail, they might have gone to jail for making batches of brew but not much criminal. Yes, people helped one another if someone was sick they would try and do something, if one lost a relative thru death and sickness, there was no need to ask someone to help. Like what i say don't sound too nice, but grave yard digging they didn't have to be paid it was like a duty, this thing must be done and they all cooperated in every respect.

Jo: When did things start changing?

Adolph: We noticed it more when the family allowance cheques came and it was a sure thing for every end of the month. They would have to go out trapping to take care of themselves. I feel sorry for the old timers who really suffer for that need for help but some old windows, old ladies, just a mere pittance was allowed by the Government. It wasn't like the welfare hand out and then the Police had to go and check it out and see if they needed a ration for them. I was young then but I saw them have a hard time to make a living, maybe a bit of tea and a few lbs of flour, rice, piece of salt pork for a month and wood for fuel- that was hard. We had to go in the bush, the old ladies go out in the bush for wood to keep the fire going. Now that's changed and I don't think too many people worry about that.

Jo: Adolph has a whole bunch of carvings, sort of a hobby that you've developed

Adolph: Yes, it's been a slow process the first ones were a bit crude and I tried to improve on them and ~~made~~ made them worse so I just threw them out and I would fool around with the wood carving. I'm still not satisfied, I guess if one can't reach perfection, there's always flaws that one can't get rid of and so I just stop and not spoil my work, throw it out of the window.

Jo: You also have a really old clock.

Adolph: Yes, 1872, it stopped working for many years now. I got it going at one time and sometimes it would drag along and I guess at a certain spot the spring would have a little more power and it would race a bit, it never kept time so I just keep it as an ornament of old Grannie's wedding anniversary. I don't know if it was the 1st or later on but I know the old man bought that from Winnipeg many years ago. It was left for many years in their house and it was probably cold and I think the temperature did all that. It's not a blow but an expansion or something that cracked it .

Jo: Can you think of anyone in Hay River, Simpson, or Rae-Edzo, that's where I'm going can you think of anyone over there?

Adolph: I haven't moved around too much but Fort Smith or Chip, I did stay in ~~YK~~ for 3 or 4 yrs working for Giant. Most of the old timers have gone, I know a few of them like Charlie Sanders that I knew from 1926 in Fort Chip when he was just fresh from the old country. He lives here he used to be on Joliff Island and I see him ~~sometimes~~ sometimes and we talk. He was in Athabasca and he trapped there for quite a few years, then YK opened up.

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