



General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private

Statement Provider: Ron Siviski

Date: November 6, 2015

Location: Brunswick, Maine

Previous Statement? - N/A

Statement Gatherer(s): Erika Bjorum

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

Format: Audio

Length of recording: 22:43

Recording

EB: OK, it's recording. My name is Erika Bjorum and it is November 6, 2015. We are here in Brunswick at the Public Library. I'm here with...

RS: Ron Siviski.

EB: Great. And the file number is 20150400165. And I need to ask if you've read, understood, and signed the informed consent form?

RS: Yes I have. Thank you.

EB: And I also need to make sure you know that I'm a mandated reporter, which means that if there is a child or elder in need of protection, or if there's risk of harm or death to yourself or

others that I learn about, that this information may not be protected as confidential. And do you understand that?

RS: I do. Yes.

EB: Ok. And so this is very open-ended. I do have some suggested questions, but they are complete suggestions. Would you like, like me to use the questions or would you just like to speak about what, what you would like to speak about?

RS: I'll hear the questions.

EB: OK.

RS: And if... if I find I can't add much to the question I'll just say, let's try another one.

EB: Yeah, absolutely.

RS: Or maybe interject something similar to what we're talking about.

EB: Fine. Because these may, these may not fit exactly your story, and that's, that's fine if—that's perfectly fine. Just the first question is what, if any, is your relationship with state child welfare in Maine? And you can feel free to tell as much or as little about that as you would like.

RS: I have no involvement with the welfare system in Maine.

EB: OK.

RS: So...

EB: And then, what is it that you would most want people to know or understand from, from your experiences?

RS: That it was incredibly difficult for my Native family to understand their background. My, my grandparents came from Cacouna, Quebec and they thought they were in the state illegally, or would get reprimanded for, for being here. So they never expressed that they were Natives from Cacouna, Quebec. They kept that a secret from the um, my mother and all of the 10 siblings.



EB: Wow. How did, how did you ultimately find out?

RS: My, my generation kind of picked up the ball. In the age of the computer it became easier to do family searches. My mom and her family had, had tried to figure out the roots and they could only get so far. My grandparents spoke of relatives. For example, my grandfather spoke of his brothers and we ultimately learned that these brothers, as well as my grandfather for a short while, ended up at Tobique First Nation. So we started, started with contact with Tobique First Nation. And ultimately determined our roots were with the Nicholas Clan there. So that was a, a joyous moment. And that was only in 2004. So five of my mother's 10 siblings were aware of this. But five had passed on. So it was kind of sad that half of the family didn't know where they were from— or where my grandparents were from.

The story was interesting. My grandfather would make up stories about all kinds of things, including his, his background. One day he would profess that he was Greek. Another day he might be Italian. Occasionally, apparently he would say that he was Native and was born on a reservation. But he would apparently chuckle about that and try to get—make sure the focus was removed from that. So he never really, never really fessed up about the family history.

So they ended up in Central Maine. In Fairfield, to be exact. And again, keeping all of the history behind them—to themselves—the kids grew up in a normal, or I should say, an everyday American town. Not understanding anything about their culture or their roots. And I, I think, and others in the family think that they probably lived in fear that the kids might be removed from the home. They did not want to call any attention to the fact that they were Native. And we, we think probably they were in fear that the kids might be taken away from them. So they were a very loyal family full of love and, and compassion for each other. So...

EB: Had your grandparents passed on by the time you discovered this?

RS: My grandmother had passed on early in age. She was in her early 40s. And the children were age 21 down to four. So I never met her. My grandfather I knew. He passed away in 1968. So I have fond memories of that connection. Yes.

EB: So it took a long time to... from when they passed to actually learning this about them, and about your family?

RS: Right. Part of the... part of that was the struggle to keep going. My grandfather worked on the railroad and I'm sure, extremely limited resources. So getting by each day was, was a challenge. And I can imagine a house of 10 kids and limited income, the chaos that must have been there.

EB: Yeah.

RS: In this, in this town of Fairfield. Completely foreign to, to my grandparents, having come from Canada.

EB: Yeah.

RS: So...

EB: And so do you think they're—I mean this is—I don't know if you even have a sense of this, or where that feeling comes from. That they were afraid of the kids being taken away. Do you think that that was coming specifically from if people found out that they were Native? Maybe they would be more suspected? Or was it in addition to that they were not—they were concerned about their legal status of being here and what that would mean? And maybe both? Or...

RS: I think it was—I'm pretty confident it was both.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: Yeah, right. They thought they might have been in the state illegally and if anyone found out that they were Native that maybe there'd be some reprimand in order.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: And apparently, when the family left Cacouna, Quebec it was pretty chaotic there we're told. Lots of fighting, lots of trouble. And that's probably why they all moved down to Tobique First Nation, to get away from, from that scene. So it was clear to them, I guess, that exposing their Native roots could have resulted in, you know, like I said, reprimands, and, and more hardship for the family. Just by revealing who they were.

EB: Right. And so I'm off the questions now. These obviously are just about questions that are arising from listening to you. But if I could ask—because I know you've been reading the report,



and the findings from the Commission—how do you feel like what you’ve been reading or what you’ve learned about it—how do you feel like that relates to this story? And I ask that not because I can’t think of ways, because I can...

RS: Yeah.

EB: But I’m wondering what has, what has come to your mind as you’ve been reading this.

RS: Well I’m a bit exhilarated by just the word “truth.”

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: Just having the truths come forward, come forth is pretty powerful. More so than I imagined it. After I read the report and shared the report with my family—it’s, it’s... it’s amazing the

exhilaration from the truths being known. And I’m encouraged that the work that will be ongoing here is positive. And we all have, we all have stories to tell. And I think telling it is very powerful.

EB: Mm-hm. I would say... that one of the, one of things that comes to mind for me related to that, what you just said, is that, um, the absence of truth is, is sometimes misinformation and misunderstanding and stereotypes and, and that kind of thing, but it is also silence. Simply silence. And it seems to me that your family had to—that silence was part of your family because of this fear you’re talking about. And that it’s not that...

RS: Yes.

EB: That seems, that seems to be... um, that seems to be a big piece of what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found in a way. That it’s the stories that have not been told, essentially, for many reasons.

RS: We went—our family went through a cycle of feelings and emotions, thoughts you might say. First we were a bit angry. Like with our parents, like why weren’t you more persistent about finding out where you were from? Or where your parents were from? And then we became a little bit more understanding of well, if you think about what the environment was like, it would

make sense, if you look at all the ramifications that were possible from you know, your revealing your Native status.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: It's understandable. So. So then we were more understanding and, and now we're—at this stage of the game we're just filled with hope that we'll continue to experience good relationships with our relatives in Canada, as well as other Natives in the state of Maine. So we're, we're... we're more hopeful about the future. It's been exciting to explore the culture that we really had no awareness of. So I'm an arts person, and it's nice to see a possible connection in my love for music.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: And some of the Native music that I've been involved with in recent years.

EB: Mm-hm. Kind of filling in that, that missing piece.

RS: Yeah, yeah. And I, I... I look at my second cousins, my great uncle's family's—I see—experience the bond that they have with their families. And it was not unlike the bond that our family had. But what they had was, was a larger sense of community that they could rely on. And, and I'm thinking—my grandparents really didn't have anybody to support them, or to rely on. They were just isolated. And I'm thinking that is unfortunate.

EB: Yeah.

RS: This community feeling. What must have been missing for my grandparents.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: So...

EB: Right. They must have known what it was from, from before they came to Maine.

RS: Yeah.

EB: And really felt its absence.



RS: Right.

EB: Yeah. And so you have reconnected with, with family and community in Quebec?

RS: Yes. Yes, and New Brunswick. And it's been, it's been terrific.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: Occasionally you get sad, like, why weren't we doing this years and years and years ago? But at least we know now. And you know, we're filled with hope that we will continue to become family...

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: With our long lost relatives.

EB: Right. Right and this, um, the other thing that comes to mind for me related to what the Commission found, which was not new information to many people who were providing statements, was really how these things get carried down generation to generation. And it was

described as intergenerational or historical trauma. But just that piece of what gets carried down, and in your family's case, this not knowing, was you know, I mean it took several generations for that to kind of begin healing itself almost. And now as you're saying, it's kind of—you can, you can, um, go forward with that.

RS: And there's, there's...

EB: And for your children.

RS: Right. So there's some responsibility there. You know, as, as my generation becomes the elders there's some responsibility in making sure the information is, is passed on. Information about the connections, the culture. The whole story.

EB: Yeah. Well I think this is a really um—I think it is an important piece and I, I'm certainly not familiar with the breadth of all the statements people have given. But I do feel like this is a

really important piece in that it, it makes me wonder how many other people here in Maine have a similar story.

RS: I was just thinking the same thing. There's got to be replications of this story. There has to be.

EB: Yeah.

RS: Right.

EB: Yeah.

RS: And becoming—the more awareness we have of the TRC and the REACH's work, the better off we all will be. But I, I did think of even the possibility of Native families in my own town...

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: And their lack of—possible lack of awareness of their roots. And there, there has to be more. So...

EB: I'm just going to go back to a couple of these in case it triggers something for you. And this, because you don't have specific experience with child welfare it may be helpful to think more broadly about this than specifically like child welfare practice. But if you could change one thing to improve Wabanaki children's experience with child welfare in the State today, what would it be, kind of given your story and given your family's story?

RS: Just making sure, I guess, that the playing field is, is even. But I also think Native children need an extra, an extra caring hand. So, yeah, just, just make sure the playing field is not only level, but we need to work hard to correct inefficiencies of the past.

EB: Mm-hm.

RS: And I, I'm encouraged that there's momentum to do that.

EB: Is there anything else that you really wanted to share or include today that my questions may have been steering you away from inadvertently?



RS: My thoughts coming here were—and I’ve, maybe I’ve touched on that already—the importance of learning and experiencing culture. It was, it was... it was a bit exciting to see that some of the Native cultural things that I’ve been involved with were in me all along. Many things seemed so natural. So that got me thinking about the fact that others probably have culture in them that they—that’s waiting to be tapped. They don’t understand it yet. But maybe someday they will. So in a way I’m sad that my mother and her family were robbed of, of their culture, to put it bluntly.

EB: Yeah.

RS: So. So. That was a great, great question. Thanks.

EB: OK. If there’s nothing else I’ll stop the recording.

END OF RECORDING