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**John Gervais and his painted saw**

**Interview**

**John Gervais (JG) at his home, Roy, Montana**

**By Candi Zion (CZ)**

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CZ We are with John Gervais and we are in Roy, Montana at John’s home. And John if you would give me your name, date of birth and where you were born and where you live now?

JG John Gervais. I was born in Augusta, January 8th, 1946.

CZ K. And you live in Roy?

JG I live in Roy now.

CZ What was your occupation or is your occupation?

JG I am retired. I operated a ranch here in the Roy country for 35 years. My son took it over and then I went to work for what is now Frontline Ag Solutions in Lewistown.

CZ Oh, okay.

JG For 14 years and then I retired.

CZ That’s where I have seen you before. HaHa! And what is your spouse’s name?

JG Marilyn Gervais. Her maiden name was Grindheim.

CZ Was she Metis or…?

JG No.

CZ K. And tell me about your parent’s and grandparent’s names.

JG My dad’s name was John. My mom’s name was Rose. My grandfather’s name was Daniel. And his wife’s name was Mary.

CZ And where did they come from?

JG My dad and grandfather were both born in Augusta.

CZ So, you were telling me earlier your family came out of Canada at a pretty early date. You want to tell me about that?

JG What I know about it is my grandfather, I mean my great, great, great grandfather, and his brothers come from Canada into Montana in the 1877 time period. Which was about the same time Chief Joseph made his run to Canada. They went into what is now Rocky Boy country and they did some hunting and trapping. And...I think they were there less than a year before they moved on to the Augusta area and into a town…it wasn’t a town when they got there…it’s Clemens, Montana and it’s on the Dearborn River. Southwest of Augusta where they trapped and logged.

CZ Do you know why they left Canada?

JG I do not.

CZ So…do you know their names, the great, great, great grandfather?

JG My great, great, great grandfather’s name was Calphus.

CZ Wow, that is an interesting name! Do you have any idea how to spell that?

JG Yeah. C-A-L-P-H-U-S.

CZ That’s a really interesting name. And you said that the Native tribe was what side?

JG Chippewas Cree and they are now with the Shell, Little Shell Tribe.

CZ Little Shell Band. Are you registered there with the Little Shell then?

JG The kids are.

CZ Kids are? What percentage would they be?

JG More than 1/8.

CZ More than 1/8. And you said they were French?

JG My great, great, great grandfather, they were…he was French Canadian. And he married an Indian lady here in Montana.

CZ In Montana then? Okay. Do anything about where her family came from?

JG I do not.

CZ Interesting. Did you have any traditions that passed on, any family recipes, or…certain phrases or language?

JG Um…when I was in grade school, we used to go up to the Rocky Boy Reservation when they did their pow-wows. And…we learned how to make arrowheads, and do beadwork and we also went out in the fields with the guys and picked rocks; they worked on the ranches up there. Picked rocks. I don’t remember any of that…I don’t remember any…we learned the language but, I don’t remember any of that.

CZ Umhum. So, you just went up and stayed for short periods .

JG Like a month. Maybe 45 days during the summer.

CZ Summertime…that must have been fun makin’ arrowheads.

JG Umhum.

CZ And you were talking about your ancestors, it was about the same time as Chief Joseph. Did they have any more stories they talked about?

JG I never did know them. I don’t know if they passed stories on. I just knew…I just knew the elder people talking about that was how they came…that was the route they came down. So no, I don’t. Um…I don’t know any other stories.

CZ The reason I asked, I talked to another lady that her…the LaTray family had come down around the same time. So, I’m wondering if they were all together traveling. Because they talk about Chief Joseph, too.

JG The LaTrays from Winifred?

CZ Yep. Are you related to any of the LaTrays?

JG I don’t think so. See...like we have a lot of relatives…Rosettes at Rocky Boy. My aunt married a Rosette and…one of my aunts, and the other one married a Rosette which was his brother. And I have a lot of relatives, a lot of cousins, Rosettes up there.

CZ Any other family names up there?

JG No, not that I can think of. I mean there’s kids married, and you know, I had all that stuff down and I don’t remember it, I mean…

CZ Sure.

JG My memory is not as good as it used to be.

CZ Yeah…I get it! HaHa!! So…you ended up here in Roy. How did you make it from…what was your story from when you were a kid in Augusta to now? What happened in that time?

JG Okay, when I graduated from high school in 1964…

CZ From Augusta?

JG Augusta. And I joined the Air Force. It was the Vietnam War. So, I joined the Air Force and I was stationed in Texas for 4 years. I was a jet engine mechanic and we were always on call to go to Vietnam. Because jet engine mechanics were pretty well needed over there, but I never did get to go. When I got out of the service, I attended Montana State University. I met a guy named James Taylor that used to own the Horse Ranch. And I started working for them down in Bozeman ‘cause they had a ranch down there, while I was in college. When I got…my junior year of college, he sent me up here for the summer to work. And…during my senior year he asked if I wanted to come up here and manage this ranch. So, in 1972 I came up here with my wife at that time and took over the management of the horse ranch. I was there for 7 years. And, during that time, my wife then…she decided to go New Jersey, so she just packed up and left. With the kids, so…we got a divorce and I went back to college. I have a degree in range and animal science. I went back to college for a business degree. That’s where I met my wife now, was in college, and they had a ranch out northwest of here. About 7 miles from town, so I went out, we got married and I went to work down in the Judith Gap country for a couple years. And her dad and mom decided to retire. So, we had the opportunity to take over that place and we were there until…my son was...25, so he took it over and I went to work in town at Frontline Ag Solutions.

CZ And how long did you work there?

JG Thirteen years.

CZ Thirteen years.

JG Thirteen and a half.

CZ And you said you are retired now?

JG Yes.

CZ Do you have any traditions now that your dad shared with you?

JG My dad and I were never really close. So, no. He didn’t, he didn’t really want to be associated with the Indian part of his life. And I did. So that is one of the reasons we didn’t do a lot of things.

CZ But it’s interesting as a kid you went to Rocky Boy, so how did that work if he didn’t really want to…

JG He went, the reason he went was probably for the money. He didn’t join in any of the other stuff we did. He and my mom and the other people that went stayed in town and we stayed on the reservation.

CZ I don’t know…did I ask you…was your mom part Native or was she…?

JG She was part, umh, yeah. She was ah...born in Louisiana and she was part French and ¼ Indian at least.

CZ From the southern Metis! Oh, interesting! How did they ever meet?

JG Ah…she moved to Montana in the 40s, the early 40s. And they go married, they must have met at the…I don’t know, she didn’t really, neither one of them really talked about it much. ‘Cause they didn’t do that type of stuff, and probably in 1942 they got married. They live in Augusta for most of their life, and then they moved to a town called Boulder, Montana where they both went to work for the school up there that took care of mentally ill people. They worked up there ‘til they both passed away.

CZ Did they pass away suddenly?

JG Ah…my dad did, he had a stroke and my mom, six years later…she passed away from a stroke.

CZ Really, but they both were working up until the time they passed…

JG Well, my mom quit a year before she did and my dad, yeah, was working ‘til he passed.

CZ How old were they when they passed away?

JG Dad was 66 and my mom was 69.

CZ Pretty young. So…did he fight in WWII?

JG No. He ah, had a disability with one of his arms. So yeah, he didn’t go…

CZ Was that from a logging accident?

JG Probably.

CZ You don’t know exactly what happened?

JG No.

CZ Hmm. Yeah, my dad didn’t either because he had a hearing problem. And I don’t think that was easy for them either to have...everybody else went and they stayed back. Did he ever talk about it much?

JG No.

CZ Sounds like he was pretty closed mouth about a lot of things? And it sounds like mom too then!

JG Yeah. My mom was probably even worse. My mom was married to my dad’s older brother who was in the war and he got killed. Before he left, she was pregnant, and she moved up to Augusta where his family was from. And her…that’s how her and my dad got together, I think. And my half-brother was born and my dad raised him as his own.

CZ That’s marvelous! So, you said you weren’t…he wasn’t so much interested in the Native side. Do you think his mom and dad felt that way too? Were they not owning the Indian side?

JG You know, I didn’t know his mom and dad. They both died at an early age. I think, if I remember right, she died when she was about 40. And he died when he was 35. Alcohol poisoning. So, I don’t know if that’s one of the reasons my dad and mom didn’t talk about things much.

CZ Did you know them at all…they’d be gone by that time. You were too young. Did you have family gatherings where everyone would get together and have big shindigs and music?

JG Ah…family ones?

CZ Yeah.

JG Ahm…not very often. We, my dad’s sisters lived in Augusta and we would get together with them at holidays and stuff, but other than that, no.

CZ So, I suddenly had this thought about the Buckhorn Bar downtown. I remember a story my dad talked about. Somebody brought a live bobcat in and turned it loose.

JG I heard that story also, but I don’t know who that was or anything. But I’ve heard about those stories.

CZ It wasn’t your family anyway the, I thought you were trappin’…

JG Well, there were lots of people trappin’ up there at that time, but…

CZ True, that’s true. Yeah. So, I was just wondering, when you had family gatherings if you had any certain traditional foods or anything…I guess if they weren’t owning the Indian side, they probably weren’t doin’ those…

JG Well see we…I guess we never did any Indian meals except when we went up to the reservation. And…like I said I was in grade school and I don’t remember what they were.

CZ And that was Rosettes you would stay with up there? Your family up there?

JG Nods.

CZ Did you know if they went to school at all?

JG My dad and my both graduated…er…went to the 8th grade. My grandfather ah…my great, great grandfather, he didn’t go through school. He did…he mighta went through to the 4th or 5th grade. But most of them went through to the 8th grade.

CZ And your grandfather, I guess…you don’t know what grade…the 8th grade too probably? There in Augusta? At the school in Augusta?

JG Probably, well…where they went to school at was Bean…, Bean Lake Schoolhouse I believe?

CZ Oh, okay.

JG It was a country school not too far away from Clemens. And then there was the Dearborn School, I think, some of them went there. But they didn’t go to Augusta school.

CZ Okay. Gotcha. Were there a lot of other Metis families that went to school there do you know?

JG Actually…there wasn’t any other Indian type families around Augusta except for us.

CZ Really!

JG I think they all moved that were there. Well…actually I can’t…there was 2 other families. One of them was Trochett (sp) and Luceros that lived…one of them lived in Augusta and the other one lived in Gilman which is a little place north of Augusta on the road to Choteau.

CZ So basically, just those 3 families you know of then.

JG Yeah. I don’t know if they did anything up around Clemens. I think they were more around…I know that the Lucero family worked for the railroad. Ah…and I think the Trochett family did too.

CZ You know it makes sense, Gilman. Well, and then there were Molitares.

JG The Molitares…they lived in Augusta for a while. Most of them the parents passed, I don’t think they stuck around Augusta.

CZ I remember the little old granny lived across the street from the Wagons West Motel. She’d have her grandkids down and I’d go play with them. She liked those carp you could get out of the creek down there. So…do you know, if they were the only Native families around there, if they would have experienced any kind of prejudice?

JG Hunuh. They didn’t.

CZ They didn’t.

JG Actually you know, back in those days, that I remember, uh…there was no such thing as prejudice. People accepted you for work ethic and beliefs. And ah…you know, they…as far as I remember there wasn’t anything like that. And I don’t ever remember anyone saying anything about it. One of the things that I noticed in my life, is that back then, back in the 60s, 50s, and probably before, if you were part Indian and you left the reservation, you worked harder than most white people did just to prove that you were as good as they were. And if you lived on the reservation you worked off the reservation or had a farm or ranch business on the reservation that you worked at. Those people worked very hard to get what they got. And now days, it seems like they want everything given to them. They want to be recognized as an individual society, yet they haven’t deserved it because they haven’t proven anything to people that they deserve that. Ahm, you know…as a government we give these tribes and reservations all kinds of money and you go look at a reservation, I wouldn’t want to live there. They are…I don’t know. No respect for anything. They feel that the more you give the more they deserve. And…I sometimes am ashamed to say that I am an Indian. ‘Cause I don’t want to be looked at as one of those people. That’s my belief. And back in the day, those people were admired by people for how hard they worked. And ahm, they were respected. You know I just…the times have changed to where Indian people have become disrespectful and think everything should be given to them.

CZ So, you obviously worked hard because you have 2 degrees to show for your educational work.

JG Yes.

CZ So you have…tell me your degrees again?

JG Animal Science and Range Management, and Ag Business.

CZ And those basically…your careers were based on what your education was. I mean you put your career, your degrees, to work.

JG Yeah. And anyway, I’m not saying all Indian people are all like what I just said. ‘Cause there are a lot of, there are some younger ones that go to college and make a life for themselves. But you know, you look at the ones that don’t, they raise their kids to be exactly like ‘em. And their kids are the ones that are causing mayhem in the world today. It’s just like, they expect us to give them what their ancestors got taken away. And we owed their ancestors somethin’ probably when they came in and took their land and put ‘em on reservations. Back, way back. But that was then, it’s not today. We don’t know, today’s society, what we owe their grandfathers. That’s my thinking.

CZ So…we were talking a little bit about the prejudice and what you are saying is that working hard was respected by people. Did you have any trouble when you were a kid at school, or people that…

JG Nope.

CZ You never experienced any kind of prejudice?

JG Nope.

CZ Did people know that you were part Native?

JG Yep.

CZ They did know? Military?

JG Nope. Not ever. Ahm…I , I …like I said, I never experienced it in my whole life. And I believe that comes from your work ethics and your honesty and your…you know if you treat somebody else with respect, I believe no matter what color you are, they’ll treat you back with respect. You disrespect people, why should they respect you? That’s my view. When I was in the service, I had a lot of black friends. Chinese…I mean, different ethnic groups. But you know, umh…I wasn’t friends with all of the colored ones and all of the others. But you know, if you show them respect, they’d show it back. If they didn’t show it back then I didn’t feel it was worth pursuing as a friend. So. That’s how I think.

CZ Good sound way to look at things. Did you have any family stories that have been passed down?

JG The only story that I remember being told was my great, great (great) grandfather Calphus. He lived to be 101. When he was 97 years old he broke his collarbone. Got bucked off a colt he was riding.

CZ My goodness!

JG That’s the only story I remember. Well actually I remember them talking about hauling logs on wagons with 12 hitch horses pulling 3 freight wagons of logs to Great Falls from up at Clemens. And some of my other relatives did freight wagons to Mile City and back. You know, they kinda mentioned it in passing that’s what they did.

CZ Did they ever talk about how they got the logs out? Did they skid logs out with teams?

JG Yep.

CZ Can you tell us about that a little bit?

JG Ah…I you know…I’ve pulled logs with teams and stuff but you know they pulled ‘em out 1 or 2 at a time. And pulled ‘em down to a place where they were loaded on wagons. And then they were hauled…that’s how they broke horses for teams. Then once they had ‘em really well broke then they could ride ‘em, and sell them to the army. Made money doing that. That’s how they did…I mean they went out and rounded up wild horses and put ‘em in teams and that…

CZ What time period are we talking there. About when do you think?

JG Probably 1890 to 1900? Maybe 1910 max.

CZ Let’s see…Boer Wars, they would have been selling horses for that. So, you, you’ve skidded, harvested logs too. Tell me about the methods that you remember when you were doing that?

JG When I was in, I think I was 13 years old I was driving teams. And we went up in the mountains cutting logs, ponderosa pine mainly. They were 6 to 8 inches across and probably 30 feet long, 40 feet long. And we pulled them out 5,6 at a time with teams. And I did that when I was 13, 14. In the summertime, And ah…they made posts, set posts and the smaller ends they used for log rails and corrals. In the Augusta area.

CZ So…what kind of saws were you usin’ up in there?

JG Crosscut.

CZ Crosscut. One on each side?

JG Actually, the bigger ones they did 2, most of them were just a single cut crosscut. Like the one up here…(points to saw above doorway)

CZ Oh I see!!

JG That was one of them.

CZ That was one of the saws you used? And somebody’s hand painted it now. That’s cool. I’ll look at that on the way out. How long did you do that? You started at 13…

JG Couple years, and then when I was 15, 16 I ah…worked on a couple of ranches breaking horses. Driving teams. ‘Cause they did everything with teams back then. Mowed hay with teams. We broke horses into teams. With the mower. A 7 foot mower. And ah, used dump rakes, buck rakes, beaver slides. And when I was a senior, they went to square balers and tractors and stuff, and we stacked square bales. There were 3 other guys, that’s what we did in the summer, stacked square bales. And then, when I got out of school, I was a senior, I went into the service. I did that my junior year, stacked square bales.

CZ So, you went into the service after that, went to the service and then right to college?

JG Yep.

CZ Was that on one of the programs to…

JG GI Bill.

CZ GI Bill. Oh, that’s a pretty good deal.

JG Yeah.

CZ Yeah. So…breakin’ the colts. How did you…when you were breakin’ colts…were you breakin’ with 1, 2 good broke horses and then add the colts to the team, or how did you break your colts?

JG Took 2 of them…if you’ve ever seen that side delivery, I mean a mower, a pull one?

CZ Yep.

JG Just…they drag really hard. I mean if they get wild you just drop it down and they will go a block and they are tired and just, I mean they are lined out. Next day you did the same thing ‘cause they were still spooky. Third day you’d turn ‘em over to the buck rake, fourth day you’d turn over to the buck rake or the dump rake, they’re plum broke.

CZ That’s what you did! Then how’d you get ‘em from that point to rideable?

JG Once the summer was over or once, when the haying season was over, you could do anything with them. You could throw a saddle on ‘em, ride ‘em. And they weren’t, they weren’t afraid of anything. And then we’d go drag calves on ‘em, rope the cows, whatever.

CZ And so you broke ‘em to teams first. I could see where that would work. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your family or…?

JG Ah…no, I think that covers it.

CZ Covers it? Well, I appreciate your time and welcoming me into your home to do this. Thank you!

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