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HELEN E. WHEATON

Helen and Joe Wheaton lived in Prince Albert where Joe worked for the Saskatchewan government. They were active in the CCF party and became friends of Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Malcolm Norris: his aspirations for native people, his role in the CCF/NDP, his impatience for change.
- Jim Brady: his capacity for reading and study, his kindness towards native people, his friendship.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Helen and Joe Wheaton were close friends and political associates of Brady and Norris in P.A. Malcolm worked with Joe Wheaton who was unable to contribute to the interview because of ill health. Helen Wheaton describes the activities of the CCF and the attitude of left wingers to the party. She also describes Brady and Norris regarding their personalities and political approaches.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: I'm talking to Joe and Helen Wheaton of Prince Albert and of Emma Lake. Joe, perhaps I could start with you, could you tell me a bit about the work you did with Malcolm Norris? You worked with him in the government?

Joe: Well, there's not much to say about him, he was very good to work with.

Helen: He was the northern administrator.

Murray: Oh, I see.

Helen: Appointed before he died. And Malcolm came, I believe, that year. He was on staff and you were appointed, Joe, that's right. And they were living out at the airport. And Malcolm worked under him, along with Allan.

Murray: Do you recall the kind of work he was involved in at the time?

Helen: Malcolm?

Murray: Yes.

Helen: Well, he was with Mineral Resources and he had charge of these prospectors' schools through the north. Our daughter went up and took that course with Malcolm.

Murray: Would you consider yourself a close friend of Malcolm's when he was in Prince Albert and La Ronge? Or was he more of an acquaintance?

Helen: No, he was close friend. As was Jim.

Murray: What kind of things would Malcolm talk about to you?

Helen: Well, the conditions in the north among the native people and his hope of getting a better way of life for them.

Murray: Did he talk in terms of the government doing things for native people? Or did he talk about native people doing things for themselves?

Helen: Oh no, participating. I think he felt he was attempting to convert the native people - his own people. And he continuously carried a chip on his shoulder, which he would jokingly discuss.

Murray: He was a very aggressive sort of native leader, was he?

Helen: Yes, and yet they were afraid of him.

Murray: The native people themselves?

Helen: I think they felt he was - well it something new, a

new idea, and I think it was difficult.

Murray: Can you recall any reactions of native people to Malcolm?

Helen: Well, I think he became quite frustrated because they wouldn't come with him, they wouldn't follow him. But strangely enough, now I think, the native people are where Malcolm was in '44. They're beginning, they're being aroused.

Murray: How did he deal with that frustration? Did he talk to you about it at all?

Helen: Oh yes, he would talk about it.

Murray: What did he say?

Helen: My, it's so long ago - how do I remember? We'd get into vast arguments, of course, and discussions - not arguments, discussions.

Murray: About what should be done.

Helen: About what should be done and how it should be done.

Murray: Did he often express his irritation or annoyance or frustration with his own people?

Helen: Well, I don't think it was annoyance.

Murray: More frustration.

Helen: Well, he became frustrated, yes. The same as we whites do with other whites.

Murray: But Jim, was he the same way, Jim Brady?

Helen: Jim was a student. He was probably one of the best educated - self-educated people I ever met. He was a vast reader; he wasn't a reader, he was a student. He would read a book and review the book, make copious notes on every book he read. Condense it. And he would bring those books into town and bring them up and we would read them. He would leave them with us; we would read them. And they would be all books on economics or world conditions.

Murray: Was he the same kind of activist as Malcolm Norris?

Helen: Not the same kind, I wouldn't say, no. I think Jim was quieter, he was deeper, and he wasn't in as much of a hurry as Malcolm was. I think, perhaps, a great deal that is going in the north now, or among the native people all over, stems a great deal from Jim.

Murray: From his talking to people?

Helen: Yes. He had much more patience with the native people than Malcolm had.

Murray: Do you think that the native people felt more akin to Jim than to Malcolm?

Helen: I think possibly. Mind you, I may have talked to one native person who came under his influence.

Murray: And what did he say?

Helen: Well, it was a woman. And Jim did a very great deal to help her. She was a down and out Indian girl and Jim helped her on her feet by talking to her quietly and patiently.

Murray: Jim didn't show, then, the frustration that Malcolm did?

Helen: No, I don't think he did. Oh, he was one person you'd meet in a life time.

Murray: Jim?

Helen: Yeah. Our whole family were very, very fond of both Jim and Malcolm.

Murray: Were they close friends, or were they mostly...?

Helen: Oh, yes. No, no, they were very close friends, but different temperaments.

Murray: Were both men active in the CCF? Or did they consider the CCF to be becoming not a people's party?

Helen: They - yes. They became disillusioned.

Murray: When do you think that started to happen as far as the two men separately were concerned?

Helen: I would say in '44 or '45. When they got into the mechanics of government.

Murray: Right. So they became disillusioned very quickly.

Helen: Jim was never involved as a government employee.

Murray: But he did work up until 1950 for the government, as a field officer for DNR.

Helen: Oh, did he?

Murray: And he finally quit in Cumberland. But I know Malcolm stayed with the government until...

Helen: But he was prospecting as well.

Murray: Well, he was prospecting in the '50s.

Helen: Yes.

Murray: After he quit.

Helen: Oh, but I think he was prospecting before that too, wasn't he?

Murray: Well, he worked at Cumberland...

Helen: He worked at Cumberland House, you're right. I'd forgotten that.

Murray: Do you recall them at all being active in the CCF party in Prince Albert and La Ronge?

Helen: Oh, no. Oh, you mean Jim?

Murray: Either one.

Helen: Not Jim. Jim never lived in Prince Albert.

Murray: What about Malcolm?

Helen: Yes, he was active.

Murray: Did he hold any positions on the executive at all?

Helen: I'm not sure if he was ever on the executive or not.

Murray: But he was active in meetings, was he?

Helen: Oh, yes. In fact he was very vocal and rather shunned by the right wing section of the group in Prince Albert.

Murray: Do you recall some of the issues that he brought up within the party?

Helen: No, I don't.

Murray: It's a long time ago, isn't it?

Helen: Yes, it's a long time ago. And they would be, every one of them would be sound, I could tell you that.

Murray: He was a thorough man, was he?

Helen: Yes. He was very - what's the word I want now? Strong in putting a point across and this the right wing group would find disturbing. Because he could put a point across well.

Murray: Was there also a left wing section of the party that was alive, that he was a group, a part of a group?

Helen: Oh yes, well not as such, but that group seemed to swing together.

Murray: Who were some of his associates in the CCF?

Helen: Allan McIsaacs, ourselves, Fred Woloshun, at North Battleford, (inaudible) at North Battleford.

Murray: Is he still in North Battleford?

Helen: Oh, yes. Who else? Bill Grant, he used to be the (inaudible) on the Commonwealth staff. He was a friend.

Murray: Where would he be now?

Helen: I haven't any idea. He's left the staff of the Commonwealth. I don't know where Bill is.

Murray: Do you recall any battles that took place within the party that Malcolm was involved in over policies? That were won or lost by the left?

Helen: I don't remember any particular one, but there were certainly many. Actually, I do remember one. At the time of the Winnipeg Declaration, very strongly opposed to that. And this group, well Woloshuns and ourselves, Malcolm, and the Steels (they're now living in Alberta), we were involved in studying that together as a group. And I might say we threw out the most of it.

Murray: Threw out the Declaration?

Helen: And wanted to go with the Regina Manifesto, if we could do that.

Murray: When was the Winnipeg declaration?

Helen: What year was that? The Coronys were in on that too, Dave and Dot Corony.

Murray: Would that be 1950, or would it be that late?

Joe: Somewhere around there.

Helen: No, I think - wasn't it before the fifties?

Murray: '33 was the Regina.

Helen: That was Regina.

Murray: Right.

Helen: Regina Manifesto.

Murray: Anyway, I could find that out. But that group opposed the position of the Winnipeg Declaration?

Helen: The Winnipeg Declaration, that's right.

Murray: That might have been before they won the election in '44. Was that possible?

Helen: Oh, no.

Murray: It was after that?

Helen: No, no, no, no. It was after. You see, the Coronys, all these people, came here after '44, after the government was formed, the NDP or the CCF formed the government.

Murray: Can you recall what the political atmosphere was like, you know, when Malcolm first came in '46 and onward? Was it an exciting political period for left wing people?

Helen: Well, we were all enthusiastic to make the first attempt on the continent to make socialism work. We were all eager beavers. And I think we gradually became a little more disillusioned all the time.

Murray: As time went on. What kinds of things that the government did made people disillusioned? Can you recall any specific policies, or was it an attitude?

Helen: Well, there seemed to be a retrenchment, a withdrawing from the ideals we all had, until they got to the point where they brought in the Winnipeg Declaration which squashed the real meaning.

Murray: How long did the sort of original radical ideals guide the government, do you think? Or did they guide them at all once they became the government?

Helen: Oh, I think they did at first. There were a few radicals in the government. And I think they did at first, but gradually they diluted everything. Not everything, of course, we have good things yet.

Murray: How did Malcolm and Jim feel about that?

Helen: Well, they felt the same way. We all became frustrated.

Murray: Did they leave the party, do you know, over these issues?

Helen: Yes, I think they all did.

Murray: And yourself?

Helen: No.

Murray: You stayed in?

Helen: Couldn't see anywhere to go but there. I'm prepared to go the left, but I'm not prepared to go right.

Murray: Right. Did they see the party still as the best, you know, the best of the parties existing?

Helen: Oh yes, I'm sure everyone did. Allan has left the party, you know.

Murray: That's more recently, I think, isn't it?

Joe: Yeah, that's more recent.

Helen: Well, I think possibly he's left once or twice, and gone back again.

Murray: Can you think of any anecdotes that would demonstrate what kind of people Malcolm and Jim were? Were they humorous people?

Helen: Oh, yes. Not Jim, I don't think Jim had as much of a sense of humor. He was a serious, thinking man. But Malcolm had a sense of humor. He was always going to drink the Neestows under the table and this sort of thing.

Murray: The Neestows were the white, the white man. How did each of the two men feel about their Indian ancestry?

Helen: I would say proud of it. They weren't ashamed of it.

Murray: Did they speak of it much or was it just assumed that they were proud of their ancestry?

Helen: Well, as I say, Malcolm seemed to carry a chip on his shoulder. And he gave you the impression that he had a feeling you were talking down to him. Which no one ever could or did, or intended to do (inaudible) to Malcolm. We all had too much respect for him.

Murray: But he still felt sometimes that people were talking down to him?

Helen: Oh, I'm sure he did. Because his little remarks he would make. I really can't remember any of them now.

Murray: Do you think he was defensive in that way at all?

Helen: Yes, I think he was defensive.

Murray: Despite the fact that he was so well respected.

Helen: He, himself, was on the defensive at all times. Where you didn't have that feeling with Jim. You could sit down and meet him without feeling that he was thinking you were white and that I was thinking he was Indian. You could just meet the same. Of course, both of them had quite a bit of

white blood in them.

Murray: How would you differentiate the two men as far as being political activists in terms of actually organizing and getting things done?

Helen: Well, organizing, politically, I wouldn't know. But everyday organizing and talking to people, I think they were the same, with a little different method. As I said, Malcolm would railroad, or bulldoze over his ideas, where Jim was quiet and would get his point across.

Murray: Do you recall them ever talking about their work in organizing the Metis Association?

Helen: No, I don't remember that at all.

Murray: Malcolm was also active in the establishment of the Metis Friendship Centre.

Helen: Yes.

Murray: Do you recall that?

Helen: And Malcolm worked in there after he was fired by the Thatcher government. He took charge of the Friendship Centre and his wife worked in there. Mary had an unfortunate incident in there, which you probably heard of, and it was very upsetting.

Murray: She was beaten by a native person.

Helen: Yeah, a drunk person, a drunk native.

Murray: What kind of effect did that have on Malcolm do you recall?

Helen: Malcolm was very incensed, very annoyed.

Murray: Do you think it had a permanent effect on either of them? As far as their attitudes?

Helen: Oh. Well, Mary was back to the Memorial Dinner we had for Malcolm. We were invited too, by the Indian/Metis people. And I think that was the most impressive evening I've ever spent. It was very moving, because we were all very fond of Malcolm and admired him. There's one fellow you should see, and I don't know where he is. He was there that night - oh what was his... he was a smoke jumper. He was the head of the smoke jumping group here.

Murray: Not Frank Tomkins?

Helen: Frank. Have you seen him? You've got him on your list. Because Frank's father...

Murray: Peter?

Helen: Peter was very close to both Malcolm and Jim. Now is Peter still living?

Murray: I don't think so.

Helen: I think Frank might fill you in a bit there. Are you going to incorporate in your research the family, Malcolm's family?

Murray: Oh yes, I will be talking to them.

Helen: Mary has remarried.

(Break in tape)

We were going to Flin Flon, no Snow Lake, for Christmas. We had a daughter living there. Jim always came up to the office, and the day before we left Jim dropped in. And he said he was on his way to The Pas. And I said, "When do you go?" He

said, "On the train tomorrow afternoon." "Well," I said, "we're leaving for The Pas in the morning, we'll be going right through The Pas. Would you like to drive with us?" So he did, and we had a wonderful visit. We settled all the affairs of state on the way down. And I didn't know at that time - he got off there and went up to Cumberland House where he had family living - which I didn't know about. And it shortened the miles having Jim along to discuss state of affairs with.

And I remember another incident. It was that lady, the lady I bought my section of the business from, and she was still working for me, and she'd dreadful prejudice against anybody that wasn't white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. And I came back from my lunch at noon - our daughter was working over the noon hour - and she said, "Do you know what that Lou did?" And I said, "No, I haven't any idea. What did she do?" "She opened the cash box and gave twenty dollars to an Indian." So I went out and I said to Louise, "Who did you give twenty dollars to?" And she said, "Jim. Jim came up." And of course we would have given Jim two hundred dollars without him signing an I.O.U. or anything. That was our regard of Jim.

Murray: And hers as well despite her prejudice?

Helen: Not hers, no. It was our daughter who'd given the twenty dollars.

Murray: Oh, it was the daughter, I see. And it was the woman who came to you and complained?

Helen: Yes, oh, great consternation. She'd given twenty dollars out of the cash box. Which was quite all right, we knew we'd get it.

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