

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: JOSEPH LEE PHELPS  
INFORMANT'S ADDRESS: 207-29th STREET,  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: SASKATOON, SASK.  
TRIBE/NATION: SASKATOON,  
LANGUAGE: SASKATCHEWAN  
NON-INDIAN  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: JUNE 26, 1976  
INTERVIEWER: MURRAY DOBBIN  
INTERPRETER:  
TRANSCRIBER: JOANNE GREENWOOD  
SOURCE: SASK. SOUND ARCHIVES  
PROGRAMME  
TAPE NUMBER: IH-403  
DISK: TRANSCRIPT DISC 98  
PAGES: 22  
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JOSPEH LEE PHELPS

Mr. Phelps was the Minister of Natural Resources in the Saskatchewan CCF government from 1944 to 1948. He was responsible for the introduction of many innovative programs in the north. He was involved in the hiring of Malcolm Norris.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Northern Saskatchewan in the 1940s.
- Attempts to replace welfare in the north with programs for fish and fur marketing which would enable northerners to make a reasonable income.
- Malcolm Norris; his work for the government in the 1940s.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Joe Phelps was the first Minister of Natural Resources in the first CCF government of 1944. In the interview he talks about the problems facing a poor government having to deal with an enormous area with the population spread out and always moving. The difficulties of trying to implement programs that would

help the native people - the efforts to explain programs to people and get their support. The complete lack of any communication in the north, the lack of government personnel to sell the programs. The work of Malcolm Norris - his success in getting people to accept the CCF initiatives in program development. His concern with rebuilding native pride and culture. The role of the church in the north and the cooperation received by the government. The efforts of the government to establish some order in fish and for marketing to give the native people and decent return for their products.

Murray: I am talking to Joe Phelps of Saskatoon who was the first Minister of Natural Resources in the CCF government. Joe, was there a platform policy regarding the north and native people in the '44 election? And if there was such a policy, who in the party developed it?

Joe: No, I would say there was no policy. It was not even on the list. A good many NDP folks, or CCF at that time it was called, didn't realize that there was a problem in the north. And I can understand that. I never was in the north, that far north, myself. A lot of people think they go north by going to Prince Albert. Well, goodness gracious, you might as well go to Regina as going to Prince Albert. I mean, it's not in the north half of the province yet. You got to go up to, pretty

near halfway up Montreal Lake before you hit the centre of the province. And from Montreal Lake on north, I had never seen it. And I didn't know anything more about it than anybody else did. And when I went up there, it was a brand new ball game and I could see that right the first time I went over, that the whole thing was a literal wilderness so far as general knowledge is concerned on the part of our own Saskatchewan people, let alone anybody else.

Murray: When did you first go up, in 1944, the year of the election?

Joe: No, I wasn't even up there in the election. Yes I did, I made - I forget now where I did go. I got up on the fringe but I didn't go clear into the north country. No, that wasn't until after I was elected and after I was in as minister for at least two months before I even went up. And then I went up and took the wife and family because I wanted them all to see what the heck it was like. I wanted them to know what some of my problems were, being in charge of administering the north half of this province.

Murray: What was your first impression on going up there?

Joe: Well, the first impression was the vastness of it, just the literal size of the north half of this province and I was struck with the potential of it. Now I know as a prairie person, I had to look at a new picture - rock and hills and hollows and whatnot. But I was particularly impressed with the forest belt that was in between that and the north country which was the real rock and lake, fish and minerals. There was

a distinct difference between those different areas and I was almost thunderstruck with the potential, with the literal geographic dimensions. Well, I couldn't get over it for weeks, to just digest what all that meant. Our people sit down here and talk about the north country and they haven't seen the north boundary of this province, half of them.

Murray: Did you get the chance to go into any of the native communities to see the conditions of the native people at that time?

Joe: Oh yes, we stopped. It wasn't just an air tour, oh no, no. We were up there I think it was ten days if I remember right. And I guess my first wife was the first woman that ever went down the uranium mine. We got a special permit to go down the uranium mine. They had a shaft partly dug at that time.

Murray: Was this in Uranium City?

Joe: Uranium City. We were all over and stopped at most of the main points. I left Floyd Glass to arrange it because he was a great believer in the north country and he was the only pilot we had for our one plane that we had at that time and we had some meetings. I remember we had a meeting at Cumberland House and we sat out on the lawn, right in the field and had an open air meeting. There was quite a crowd there and I imagine 90% of them were either native or Metis people. And one of the first questions that came up, I remember it came up at Cumberland House. Cumberland House, as you know now, you can go in there by car but at that time you could either go in by water or fly or walk. But I was struck by the possibility of Cumberland House because there was a lot of native grass there, a tremendous amount. And I thought, my goodness gracious. You

hardly ever saw a moose at that time (we had let them overuse the natural supply of meat) and why didn't we get some cattle, a herd of cattle in there, to start and populate that area and supply a local meat supply. Everything was there. And we later did that. But these were the things. And at Beauval, I remember was another place. I thought well, here's tremendous potential, that people get programs going to help themselves.

I remember at Cumberland House the chief spokesman for the Indian people came and he wanted to know what we were going to do about relief, increasing the relief, social aid they called it. And I told him straight. I said, "So far as I'm concerned, I want to get policies in here that will get people away from relief." I said, "This government, so far as I'm concerned, is going to be tough on relief. As a last resort. It's not the first thing on the list at all. I'll accept it as a very temporary thing, in an emergency. But our idea is to get other alternatives, to build up your fishing industry, get that organized better so that you'll get more out of it. Re-organize the fur trade. Instead of the fur trader coming in here and beating you fellows every day, we'll have an agency to

sell your furs and you'll get every cent that's in it. And the forest is growing here and we've got to get it so that we'll have better utilization of the forest. And what trees we do cut down we'll salvage as much as we can from it and the people will get the benefit of handling it themselves, merchandising."

I kept telling that everywhere I went. But it was a completely foreign language to them at that time. All that they knew was, "When am I going to get my relief cheque?" And when they sold any fur the only thing they'd talk about was, "Where's the nearest beer parlor?" It wasn't always the beer parlor however,

because a lot of them couldn't go into beer parlors at that time and I took that up at cabinet three different times. I'm not a teetotaler but I certainly am not in favor of the amount of drinking that is going on today.

Murray: There was a lot of that going on even in that period, 1943-45, eh?

Joe: Not in an open way. Bootleggers. And I took it into the cabinet three different times to open up our beer parlors to the native people and they wouldn't buy it. And I said, "Listen," I said, "we're setting up a fish marketing board to give these people a better return for these things and, what happens? When they get their cheque there's a white man standing around the first corner, a bootlegger, and he takes it from them and that's where they're getting their booze today and it's costing them three times as much money as it should. And it's the white men that's most of the bootleggers, too. If they're going to drink, let's bring them in like ordinary people and start to train them to handle their liquor if they're going to insist on using it. If we're going to be licensed to dispense it and we are, whether we like it or not, so let's go all the way and treat the native people the same as we treat anybody else." And there is where we started.

Murray: In 1944 there was really little consciousness among the CCF of the north. It was only after you went into the north that you started thinking about what kind of policies you should have?

Joe: Exactly. And my colleagues at that time went along on some things, they were very cooperative - except this one about the native people being allowed to go into beer parlors. They were against that, period.

Murray: What about the economic sort of things you were talking about? Was there general support for those things?

Joe: Yes, yes, I can't complain about the boys not supporting me in that. The fur marketing service being set up, the timber board, the fish marketing, they went right along with me on them.

Murray: What was Douglas's view on that?

Joe: Same thing, yes. Tommy was very sympathetic to that approach generally but he balked at letting the native people into beer parlors.

Murray: Now Malcolm Norris, I think, was brought in in 1946 and, of course, it was under your authority that he was invited. Do you recall who advised you on bringing Malcolm...?

Joe: No, I don't recall who mentioned it. I heard Malcolm Norris name mentioned many, many times - a few times anyway. And people explained to me what his ideas were, but I wouldn't know now who it was first brought it up. But it was some of the people in the north country. And they told me about him and so I got in touch with him, I think, or I had my deputy get in touch with him and have him come down and we met up in the north country. I don't know whether it was P.A. - of course, that isn't north but at that time, we thought it was north - and also at Lac La Ronge, I met Norris there.

Murray: What were your first impressions of Norris?

Joe: Very, very good. He just solidified some of the ideas that were taking shape in my mind in regard to a program for development of the north and a new deal for native people. There was one thing I never did agree with Malcolm on though, however. Quite early, I think maybe the first time I saw him, he was all for (I never heard the term before that) "aboriginal rights." And today we bandy it around and never think about it. In fact, I think they use the term, a lot of people today, and never realize what it does mean. But if you start to analyze the system and recognize the principle of aboriginal rights, well then, of course, my people, as Irish people, will go back to England as we claim half of that. Where do you stop at a thing of that kind? I don't think I have anything to say about what's happening in the land of England today but my forefathers and whatnot, they had to leave that country at one time in protest at the whole thing, the way it was going.

Murray: How did Malcolm put the argument of aboriginal rights? Was it in terms of land, or what kind of arguments did he put forward?

Joe: Both land and control by the native people.

Murray: Of what was happening in the north.

Joe: Yes. That is the one thing we had a difference of opinion on. We didn't argue about it but I just couldn't, and I wouldn't, follow him because I don't think it's right. I don't think it's right today. I don't think that is the answer. But it was the development of the resources and the Fish Marketing Board and the Fur Marketing Services, he was all for those kinds of things. We had so much common ground that one or two main things that we disagreed on weren't significant. I mean, they weren't in the picture anyway.

Murray: What did you visualize him accomplishing as a civil servant in the north?

Joe: To tie in the native people with the new programs that we were introducing. And he, of course, could talk their language, he was one of them and it would come better, I thought, from him than it would from me. I was just an upstart coming in there, never knew anything about the north country and I told them straight off always. I said, "I'm new to this country. I don't know except what you tell me and what I see. I haven't lived it and so I'm going to be careful about how I'm going to tell you about how you should live." I said, "There's a few things here that seem to me to be obvious." And then I talked about, I said, "You have no control over your products, you catch fur-bearing animals for their skins and the bootleggers come here and jew you out of half of it. The same with your fish. You get it and it's a perishable product, you've got to dump it. You don't sell it, you dump it. These are the things, and the forest products. We've got to see that everyone gets more of a share out of these things."

Murray: What was his first activity as an employee of the department?

Joe: To go around the north country, as I recall it. I didn't keep any notes or diary or whatnot, but as I recall it he was asked to spend some time getting acquainted with the key people in the north and take down notes about what they suggest and try to sell them each time with the new program we wanted to introduce in the north. And I think he must have done a pretty good job because it wasn't very long before the atmosphere seemed to change. The NDP (at that time the CCF) was suspect in a lot of the north. They didn't trust us.

Murray: The north was Liberal at that time?

Joe: Exactly. And we were bringing in a complete new philosophy and a lot of them were naturally suspicious of us. They'd been bitten so many times by the bootlegger, and by the fur trader that skinned them, and the fish buyers who also skinned them.

Murray: They were all whites?

Joe: Yes, these were white men so they were naturally suspicious of anything we had.

Murray: But they started to respond?

Joe: They started to respond, very definitely. I think it was partly a result of the work of Malcolm, getting key people. And he'd make a list of them, you know. "There's so and so. He's a leader in his group and he's got the idea now what we're trying to do." And I built up a list of contacts as a result of Malcolm's recommendations.

Murray: Malcolm would look for leadership?

Joe: Exactly. Of course he was very partial, and that's good, to native people because he was one of them. And he wanted to build them up, so we were both looking for the same objectives as far as I was concerned.

Murray: Malcolm wasn't just an employee then. He was active in talking about policy and developing policy?

Joe: A northern policy particularly. He did a little bit of prospecting. He was a prospector himself, that was his main job. But mostly he was just to get lists of key personnel. He was a contact person and to get the idea of the message and to give me, because I didn't know, to keep me posted on how our general ideas were going over and what we should do to improve them, to improve the plan and to improve the mechanism that we were using to apply the plan.

Murray: In the first years that you were minister, did things go pretty smoothly in the north or was there a fair amount of conflict?

Joe: There was very little local conflict but there was lots of conflict so far as the fish buyers were concerned. The conflict came from the people who had been bleeding the north and had been living off it. Not living there necessarily but living off the other people. And that's where the conflict came and a very sharp one. Because as I say we were out to do away with the bootlegging of fur and the buying of fish at bargain prices and all this kind of thing. We were out to stop that.

Murray: Did the cabinet support you in these conflicts?

Joe: Yes, I certainly cannot criticize the cabinet. Oh, there were one or two of them had some pet peeves about things, but in a general way they gave me good cooperation on the northern program.

Murray: Was there any conflict at all between you and Malcolm other than the somewhat different ideas on some points? Was there ever any confrontation between you and Malcolm on any point?

Joe: Confrontation? No, no. We got along very well, I figure. I mean, when you're dealing with people at that level... I mean, we were both carrying a lot of responsibility. I was carrying the responsibility for general policy. He was carrying the responsibility for seeing it was applied. So there are times when you have differences of opinion about how to go about things or something of that kind, but Malcolm was not the bitchy kind, finding fault or doing things behind your back. If he had anything to say he would come right out and say it and I'm the same way so we got along fine.

Murray: Did he contact you often personally about policy, about what was going on, about what might be changed, those kinds of things?

Joe: Oh yes, but it's a big country. If he got to a phone and wanted something, he could call me and reverse any time, and he did. But we did a lot of it over the telephone when he'd get out where there was a telephone.

Murray: Can you recall what the general gist of those conversations might be? What kind of things he would be phoning about?

Joe: Oh, goodness gracious, it could be any one of hundreds of things. I mean we were introducing new policies, as well as...

"What do you think we should be doing about this?" He was running into problems, and, "Well what do you think we ought to do about this?" I'd always say, "Well, what's your recommendation first?" And if I could agree with it and I did agree with it most of the time and if I had reservations I'd say, "Look, I want to think that one over and let's get together again in a week or two," or something or other.

Murray: So there was constant sort of talk about policy and how it should be done?

Joe: Oh, there was a lot, a lot of conferences - conferring not conferences. There were some conferences too. We had the first northern Fish Marketing Conference for all the fishermen. Brought them into Prince Albert. And for trappers of the north we developed the annual Fur Trappers' Meeting - not just a festival to have a good time, but a policy meeting. Because I told them, I said, "Listen, you're the people we're trying to help and you've got to get in here and help yourselves. We can't just do it for you. The government is not just going to feed you and they're not going to put a spoon in your mouth all the time. The resources are here and we want to help you to help us develop them in an organized way."

Murray: There was an encouragement for people to say, "This is what we want?"

Joe: Oh yes, we had periodic conferences for that. Because that's a two-way street. You've got to find out what the people are thinking and they have got to find out what you're thinking. And there was a play.

Murray: It seems even now there's a problem of programs being from the top down in the sense that people...

Joe: Communication is not there.

Murray: That people say this is clearly what is needed and yet the people who need that don't often see it. Is that the situation you were faced with?

Joe: Exactly. But there's another thing that we developed there and that is we developed the radio, you see, the department radio. So that we had people who were scheduled to look after the two-way, it was a two-way proposition. It was like the walkie-talkie that we've got today really but we had listening posts of people, a lot of them wives of the people in the north were our contacts, and they'd be monitoring the program. Then at certain times we had periods that you could send out messages and get messages and whatnot.

Murray: So you saw communications as a crucial...?

Joe: It was a tremendous... it was a way back into the bushes for sure at that time in the north. It was a tremendous... and there was just nothing there and it's a big country for travelling by canoe and moccasin. That's what a lot of our people don't get these days is the actual size of the northern half of this province.

Murray: I was talking to Gus McDonald the other day. We just had a short conversation and one of the things he mentioned was that DNR always seemed to have trouble finding what he termed "people-oriented" civil servants to come into the north.

Joe: Well, goodness gracious, we're having trouble today to find people who are going to work on the space programs, aren't we? Because nobody has been up there yet. To stay long anyway. They have been there and made some calls but the north country could be likened to the space today. It was almost parallel. And that's the thing a lot of people don't realize. It was another country altogether. They didn't know anything about us, or very little, except the bad part. And people coming from the south, the white man, he come up there to skin him, that's all. So there was, in too many cases and a lot of white people go there to short change people, that's all. Make a fast buck.

Murray: Certainly when DNS first started there were quite a number of young people who were really keen to go to the north and develop people-oriented programs. There wouldn't have been that kind of excitement at that time because people weren't aware of it. Is this what you're saying as well?

Joe: Oh yes, there was a number of young people that came forward and some of them - like it is today, you know - some of the young people think they've got a lot of ideas but if they're put up against it they cave in. They just haven't got the stick-to-itiveness or what it takes to really push through. But I got a lot of young fellows that wanted to go up to the north. Not all of them succeeded, certainly. Some of them blew up but a number of them, a good percentage of them, did a good job and some of them are up there today. They are part of the north country today themselves. They've done a good job, some of them.

Murray: When you were minister till 1948 what would you say, in your view, if you sat down to analyze what was accomplished in those four years and what would you say were the major accomplishment in directions?

Joe: I would say the major accomplishment was setting up the Fur Marketing Service with representation from the trappers, with an annual meeting. The Fish Marketing was a much more difficult one than the Fur Marketing. The Fur Marketing is one of the things that is still going, going good and very well. And of course, the man who helped me start that, that is the sale end, is still in charge. A tremendous fellow in that field and he's built up a service to the trappers not only in Saskatchewan but the whole north country of Alberta and northern Manitoba and whatnot. He gets fur, I understand, from all the different points. But the big thing was in the fish business because of the cyst in certain breeds of fish. And you had to fillet them and put them over an electric light so you could see if it was affected, the meat. Then if they were bad, too many, well then you discarded it. But a lot of fish were very clean but to find out the ones that weren't that was the only way to do it, put them over a light. And we had to fillet the fish and then quick freeze it and then market it and it was just as simple as that. And we set up a number. I had some very good help. Len Waite, for instance. He was in the fish business and he knew the problem from A to Z. He was a fisherman, and that is on the processing end. We worked right along. He certainly was not an NDP, or a CCFer at that time, but he was a good man to work with every day. When he told you something, that would be done. And he was a big help in reorganizing the whole fishing industry in the north.

Murray: What about agriculture? There were some initiatives in that as well but not as widespread?

Joe: No, no. The only agriculture that I would say went on was a little bit at The Pas, Cumberland and at Beauval. There was a little bit of farming there and stock raising and they had some gardens and whatnot but there was very little so far as, not only... The growing of food, that was something they hadn't done very much of.

Murray: Was there much of a tourism industry at the time?

Joe: Practically nil. I mean, people after all didn't, in those days, 1944-48, they didn't make the long trips we do today. No, no, there was no such thing as a camper you hitch on behind your car at that time and go up.

Murray: And they weren't flying in or anything?

Joe: Oh, no. We had the first plane that the government ever had. We had it.

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Joe: ...benefactor directly to the native people any more than anybody else. But he did want a chance for them to get a square deal on their part, again, and not be chiselled all the time.

Murray: What role did he see the government playing in trying to instill that kind of pride? Did he see government programs helping in that respect?

Joe: Oh, there was a certain amount but the territory was so big, the personnel so limited, I mean, to help do that kind of work. The facilities! We had one airplane! Just how do you get around that country, other people get around to do it. How did I have to get around? It was a major job to go up there and make an itinerary and contact, I was going to say, even a few dozen people scattered over the country, let alone to have big conferences or anything like that because it was physically impossible.

Murray: So the question was pretty academic at that point?

Joe: Absolutely. Goodness gracious, you might fly out and land in a lake and go to a fish camp and there would be two or three tents and nobody else knew you were in the country or anything else. I mean the communication was practically nil and people had always worked as individuals, not as groups. Working together as a group was something that was new to them at that time. Except they worked together through the churches. When there was a church or priest, or whatnot, then in that group there was a little clan there. And we always tried to keep them posted on what we were trying to do, what our main program was and to enlist their cooperation. And the majority got the idea. A lot of them I know were opposed to the CCF as a party but a lot of them played down their own political and helped us with a program that they realized was a good thing for the north, for the northern people.

Murray: You mentioned that you initiated the radio telephone service in the north. Was there any chance for you to start on a road building program, or did you visualize that as being a goal?

Joe: No, very, very little we did about roads at all because if you had a road there was nothing to travel on it unless you walked. At that time, you see, you went by canoe or dog sled. That was literally it and a road wasn't... no, that was not even... What we did do is start on the in-between areas, on the southern fringe of the northern part of the province, if you get my point, and start to build,... I know Bob Gooding, I got him there because he's a good man to organize groups of people and get things done and got him in charge of a construction crew to start to build some, well just trails really, but

bulldoze some trails out and get some places so you could get through. Mostly so we could get our equipment in for fire protection. We tried to build the roads for fire protection in areas or locations where it was economic to get there with the least cost, even if we had to go around a little. We didn't have money to build bridges and all this kind of thing except in a very limited way. But to build fire guards that could be used as a dual purpose for a rough road to get in there, a lot of that was done; but that was done in the southern part of the north half of this province.

Murray: That would be the area of La Ronge and Green Lake and those places?

Joe: Yes.

Murray: There was a question I meant to ask you earlier and that was - I think you did touch on it - what was the nature of government activity in the north before the CCF was elected or was there much?

Joe: There was not much. The government before that left it pretty well to the parish priest and I'm going to say the

bootleggers and the fur sharks. That was the three groups that run that north country. But things really quieted down when we bought a plane and they knew the government had a plane. They never knew when they looked up there was plane, even if it wasn't us at all, but it might be. And it sure quietened the north country down even with just one plane there that went around occasionally. Put in an appearance.

Murray: People didn't feel that they could quite operate without punishment after the government started flying around and checking into things?

Joe: That's one thing. A lot of it settled down. There was a change.

Murray: You mentioned there was welfare in the north when you arrived. How long had that been going on, the relief program?

Joe: Oh, I don't know. I don't know. It was a carry over from the thirties, of course. I presume it got going in the thirties. Although, in some ways, some of the people lived in the north better, in the thirties, than we did in the south.

Murray: Because they lived off the land.

Joe: They'd lived off the land and nothing happened to fur and there was still the odd buffalo, moose, they could locate and whatnot. Their desires were geared to what was there and that wasn't affected so much. It was affected some, mind you, but not to the same extent. The fish were still in the lake. The water was still wet, you know. Even when the hungry thirties was at its worst. And they could go out and they could fish

and they could get something to eat and they could patch their own canoe. I know we broke a canoe one day when we were out. We beached it and I thought, boy, this is it now, we've had it. But he looked around and got a tree with some gum on it and built a little fire, a tomato can or something and melted it up or warmed it up and turned the canoe over and done his patching right there and in an hour or an hour and a half we were going again. Well I was worried. I thought we've sure had it. It's a long way to hike out of here. Where in the heck are we going to get now? That carries right over into the 1930s or whatnot. They were in control of their own destiny there, their own bailiwick. They weren't depending on some other group. But in the meantime, we've got more dependent than ever today in our organized society. What we do when anything goes haywire today is more than I know.

Murray: What about the role of the police in the north? Was there much policing at that time?

Joe: Not very much. Very, very little. That was my impression. Of course, there were no officers stationed in the north. To patrol by canoe, that takes quite a long time. Or dog sled in the wintertime. And that's what it was. And those northern people, strangely enough, they didn't need the police that we need today. They policed themselves. Unless the bootlegger went up there and sold them some moonshine or something, then, of course, they created problems. If the bootleggers had been kept out of there and some of the white man chisellers, well the northern people, they didn't have so much trouble among themselves.

Murray: They ran their own communities?

Joe: Certainly, in their own way. It was crude ways, true, but life was crude at that time. No, no, I would say on their behalf that they were much more law-abiding than the white man.

Murray: It was only after the incursion of booze and fur buyers and the like that disrupted that?

Joe: Exactly. It was the white man's invasion of the north that is causing today the trouble. It's rubbed off on the native people and they try to imitate the white man and some of them are doing it too well and that's one of the reasons why we have so much of our problems in administering law and order in the north today. I think that's a real challenge.

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