

Nora Cummings, Peter Bishop, and Ron Laliberte:
Métis Political Activist Interviews (Feb 28, 29, 2004)

Tape 1

Start Time: 4:13.58.05

(Video Time: 4:13.58.05) Nora Cummings: I remember when they interviewed me for the position, I kind of, I couldn't even look at them I was looking down at my feet. God, it was terrible. So I went home and I said to my husband, "I've been offered a job and I don't think I can do it." I mean here's me with a grade 5 education and they want to put me in an office, they're crazy, you know, I mean I can't do this. But I think he knew at that time he was ill and he needed to, wanted to get me independent and, you know, too get going. And, of course, I talked to all my children because we've always had that closeness, my children and all of us. So they were excited for Mom, hey my youngest one was 7 years old so I started off like Peter and the rest, we started on a volunteer basis and when I started it was 75 dollars a month. And then it ended up, we were going to get, we got three hundred dollars a month. And then it was going up to six hundred. But in the meantime Jim Sinclair came and talked with me and because, in the meantime, I started getting very involved and of course I had, always had that support from home. And I had support from Clarence and a lot of the good people that I worked with. He came to me and he said, "You know Nora, I want to talk with you. There's some money available for women to get organized and become politicized." I said, "Well, what do you want me to do

about it?" He said, "I'd like you to be part of that." And I thought, oh god. I don't think so. So anyhow, I said, "All right, we'll do this." So, we did get some money from Secretary of State and again, we were organizing to bring women in, to get organized. And our first meeting there was 35 women. And I remember going to that meeting, my legs were shaking and my stomach was sick. And, god, these are smart women and how can I ever, you know, talk to them. And Howard Adams was helping me all the time to get, you know, to the ground work. And he had promised he would come to that meeting and help me out, but I didn't know they had set it up that, once we got to that far then I was on my own. Because I mean, it wouldn't look good if a man came in and started being my speaking partner. So I had phoned him and I waited, phoned him and finally he came to the phone and he said, "I'd love to go Nora but I have a class and there's just no way I can take you, but you go ahead, you'll do fine." I thought, "Oh my god." So I went into this room and so my, my... **(Inaudible)**...Vicky was with me and I said to her, "What are we going to do?" I'm not a writer, but she could write. She said, "I'll tell you what to do," she said, "You do the speaking and I'll do the writing." Well I said, "I don't know how well I can do." So we went in and we started, but here all this time I didn't know that this women were in no better position than I was. So that's where we started and we formed the Native Women of Saskatchewan. And I become very heavily involved in politics.

Ron Laliberte: What year was that if you don't mind me asking?

(Video Time: 4:17.21.25) Nora Cummings: 19-, well we started organizing in '71, in 1972 I became the President of Native Women of

Saskatchewan and I held that position for five years. So, 1972 we had our first women's conference. And we didn't realize, again coming from the grass root level, we didn't realize that when you get X numbers of dollars, and of course I had nothing to do, we had a co-ordinator that was present to know this, they were spending money 'cause they were hiring women to organize and bring this in. And our local women's group organized, fund raised bingos and different things so that we could help. So we had 1500 dollars saved up in our little bank account and we had a hundred women come in but then we had no hotels. But we couldn't get anymore money from government. I remember phoning John Diefenbaker directly. You know that was very bold because I didn't, I just felt the importance, it was my role because, you know, this is. And he did call me back and I was telling him that we couldn't get anymore money, and, and, and at that time was, the Prime Minister was Trudeau. And he says to me, "Well if you were a homosexual you would have got this money." Like it just kind of shocked me, this was a man. I said, "I beg your pardon?" Like I didn't know what, how to answer him. But anyhow he was really nice at the end he was saying, you know, so. I never forget that statement from that, that fellow, you know, but, it was new to me. I'm just at the grass root level here and that... But, I went ahead and we organized at the Bessborough. We bought, we had rooms for some of the people, we've housed some of our women that come in, you know. And, for some that we couldn't. But, Sid Buckwold was a very good friend of mine and we, we...

Ron Laliberte: He was the mayor at that time wasn't he? Or was he a Senator?

(Video Time: 4:19.24.14) Nora Cummings: No he was, he was a Senator then. And he had said to me, "You know Nora, if you want we can house some of your women at my place." You know, he was, but then the women wouldn't go and stay there. So, so anyhow, we, we had our conference and we had a good conference. Actually, Chief Dan George was our special guest, he came in. We had a lot of good guests, but we never had a political representation. They did not attend our conference. And that told me that the government was not concerned about us as women, as Aboriginal women at that point and time. And I was very frustrated because I thought, you know, when we look at that, of course, we're just a women's groups and organizations, not only Aboriginal but all were all, sort of looked at us, not our place in society. So we had a lot of good recommendations that came out of that and our women organized right, right from Uranium City, right across Saskatchewan, right into the southern parts of Saskatchewan. They had half-way homes for girls and they had daycares. They went after, and the housing program that's in Regina now, that was our local women that went after that. We encouraged our women to sit on boards, community boards, any kind so they could participate and become visible. We become a very radical group. I was a very radical person because we became very radical. And we had to become radical because that was the only way we were recognized. And we had to join forces with other women groups and the women's liberation was one and they were a very strong group at that time. And, but some of their,

their issues were nothing like ours. Like when we were fighting issues for, for our services for our people, but some of their issues just kind of blew us away, where did they get this from. And, I remember Judge Taylor, she was very good and she came over and she was talking, you know, you should be doing this and I thought gosh, that's not us. They would laugh me right out of the communities if I went out and spoke about these things. And, so I was telling one of these women and, and she said, the old lady said, "Ah, we can't be doing that," she said, "For goodness sakes we can't even burn our brassieres because we have to go and buy at the Salvation Army." Because that was the theme...(Inaudible)...but I never forget that because...(Inaudible)...

Ron Laliberte: That's funny.

Nora Cummings: But, you know, and, and I mean, it was a hard struggle for us. But I became very, very concerned and I got really involved and I thank the, my family that supported me...

End Time: 4:22.11.24