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JEAN MACKENZIE

Jean MacKenzie is a school teacher and long time resident of Prince Albert. She was on the board of directors of the Indian/Metis Friendship Centre there.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Prince Albert Indian/Metis Friendship Centre: its aims, its financing; its activities; and its staff.
- Pressure from the Liberal government to force the resignation of Malcolm Norris from his position as the director of the Centre.

Murray: I am speaking to Jean MacKenzie of Prince Albert. Jean, you were involved fairly early on in the Indian/Metis Friendship Centre in Prince Albert. Could you describe what you know of its origins and how you got involved?

Jean: Actually I got involved through the University Women's Club because they wanted a representative to attend the meetings of the Indian/Metis Friendship Centre. And at the time that I first attended it, it had its headquarters in a small house down on River Street. It was rather a queer little house because the front room was very small. We had to group around very closely in order to get in. And then the other

room was a queer place because there was a kitchen and next to it was a room with a partition that didn't go right to the ceiling, hiding the bathroom where the children had bathed and performed other functions. And apparently the wall was not right to the top so that the parents could watch proceedings. We always joked about this bathroom and wondered who was going to take the first bath.

Murray: It was quite a small place was it?

Jean: Yes, extremely small. As I recall, it had just the two rooms. And it was off from Central Avenue a couple of blocks and a little bit east of Central Avenue. And it was there that I met Malcolm Norris for the first time and some of the other members of the Indian/Metis Friendship Centre. And as I recall, Malcolm reorganized the files and organized new files and he was very methodical.

Murray: Just to get back for a moment to when the Centre actually started. Do you recall when it was originated and who was involved in getting it started?

Jean: Actually, I wasn't at the first meeting but from what I've read it started in 1957 and it was through the YWCA that the plan was formulated to get people together who were interested in Indian/Metis service council. And the chief among the ones who formed it was Rowena McLellan. She was the first president. But in the paper there was a write-up in connection with the formation and at that time this Margaret Hesselton was the chairwoman for the opening ceremonies and apparently there was quite a formal ceremony for its opening which I didn't attend.

Murray: Do you recall from your reading whether Malcolm was involved in the Centre from the beginning?

Jean: I don't recall his being there at the beginning. I think he was still busy with his job and instead, there was a Mr. Peter Tomkins and then later Joe Duquette who looked after the Centre. Joe was an elderly Indian gentleman who made his own Indian costume and was particularly pleased if anyone praised it, of course.

Murray: Was Pete involved from the beginning?

Jean: Yes, from what I understand. I didn't know him very well I admit, but I got to know Joe Duquette very well.

Murray: It had been in this small house then ever since 1957 when it was started?

Jean: Well, I think it was held first before that in the old city hall, the back of the old city hall, but I didn't attend any meetings there that I recall.

Murray: Do you recall how the Centre was funded when you started working with it?

Jean: Yes, it was mainly funded through United Appeal and contributions from different groups. We tried to get members, two members from all of the groups in town if possible. And then we'd get individual memberships too in order to raise some money. And there were bingos and there were other means that were used to find...

Murray: Did the city contribute any money, the city council itself?

Jean: I can't recall that the city contributed very much. Now, we had the house down on River Street. Probably we didn't have to pay taxes. And you see, if the council met in the city hall at first, then they would contribute the place for the meeting.

Murray: But up until 1962 anyway, it was financed through various means?

Jean: Yes.

Murray: Did the city ever contribute to it in those early years?

Jean: I don't think the city has ever contributed except, as I say, by ignoring the taxes.

Murray: Up till recently.

Jean: Yes.

Murray: Were the goals of the Centre fairly modest or what do you recall as being the main motivation for the Centre?

Jean: Well, this is one of the earliest statements in connection with the goal. The pledge was, "to know, to understand, to help." And then the aims and objectives were listed as this in these mimeographed notes that I have that go back quite a number of years back to about, oh, I would say probably it was written up in 1962 or 1963 but they deal with earlier times. And the first aim or objective was "to study the needs of Indians and Metis people of Prince Albert." Second, "to initiate community action in respect to those needs." Third, "to encourage the fuller community participation of the people of Indian descent." And four, "to create better understanding between Indian and non-Indian citizens."

Murray: What were some of the activities of the centre which were aimed at accomplishing those goals?

Jean: There weren't too many activities at first, as far as programs were concerned. But the man who was in charge, Mr. Duquette first and then Malcolm Norris, tried to help any of the Indian people who came for help. Sometimes they would help

them with clothing or they would help them with getting them a place to stay overnight or finding them a job or providing them even with money sometimes. And the Centre would make up the money when we were told that it hadn't been returned. But because it was just a small little house, we couldn't do very much with what was there.

Murray: Was it used as a place for native people just to come and maybe spend some time during the day?

Jean: Yes, that was mainly what it was for. For them to contact someone.

Murray: There were couches and things in the Centre?

Jean: Yes, but it was very, very tiny as I say.

Murray: Right.

Jean: And then after that we moved. I think the next move was down to the basement of the Saan store and we were right next door to the Alcoholics Anonymous group. They objected I think a little bit to it because of the desire they had for anonymity. But it was a fairly satisfactory place. It was certainly larger but not in a very good neighborhood in a way.

Murray: Was it a higher rent?

Jean: Yes.

Murray: It would have been more expensive than the other place?

Jean: Yes, it was more expensive but there was more space. But there still wasn't enough space for instance to have very much of a program.

Murray: If people stayed overnight, it was the exception. It wasn't really designed for people to stay.

Jean: No, no. Occasionally they would maybe stay there overnight but that was exception. But usually what the director would do would be to find a place for them to stay other than that.

Murray: Would it be with a friend or get a hotel room for him or...?

Jean: Yes, well usually I suppose.

Murray: Something that didn't cost any money.

Jean: If possible.

Murray: Did it attempt to sort of orient native people who were coming into the city for the first time?

Jean: Yes, this was one of its main purposes. And you see, the director was one who could speak Cree so that he would help the people who couldn't speak English.

Murray: Right. Was there ever any particular period of time where there was a large influx of native people into Prince Albert or has it been a general sort of thing?

Jean: I don't really know. I would think that in the last ten years probably much more than before.

Murray: So, really before...

Jean: But that's just a guess.

Murray: So it was really after Malcolm died that there was a more noticeable influx of native people.

Jean: I would think this might be the case but I don't know any statistics on that.

Murray: Right. How often did the board meet? What was the activity of the board or was it pretty much a...?

Jean: It was more guidance than anything else. We were, and I suppose legally, responsible for what went on but we were never held legally responsible. But we would meet, usually, once a month. It would depend on the need, of course, and sometimes we'd have to meet oftener but usually there would be a monthly meeting and decisions would have to be made about whether or not we could afford different things and how we could branch out if possible and get other funds. And of course, the last few years there have been a great many more funds and the plans then to spend the funds in worthwhile programs.

Murray: Were there social activities involved around the Centre as well?

Jean: Yes, later. There were a few down at the room that was in the basement of the Saan store as I recall. There were some dances down there but I don't recall anything very much of a social nature down in the little house on River Street.

Murray: Just too small to...?

Jean: Yes. Well there might have been just a few gatherings socially but it was too small for anything much.

Murray: Did you mention when it was moved to the Saan store basement? Do you recall what year that was?

Jean: No, I've forgotten what year it was. I tell you, Cy Stanley would probably know that better than I.

Murray: Would it have been in the mid-sixties do you think, or

later than that?

Jean: Oh yes, uh...

Murray: When Malcolm was director it was in the Saan store was it?

Jean: No, no, it was still at the little house on the river bank I think. Because it was there that they had the meeting where they had to ask him to resign.

Murray: So he was there. It didn't move until after.

Jean: No, till after that.

Murray: Could you describe that whole incident where pressure was put upon the board to get rid of Malcolm and how the board felt, that whole...?

Jean: Well, I think we felt as though we were being dictated to by the government.

Murray: Who were the individuals who actually put it to the board that...?

Jean: Well, actually it was Mr. Steuart and Mr. Guy who told us that if Malcolm Norris wasn't either fired or decided on his own to leave, that we wouldn't be getting grants.

Murray: At this point, you were getting money from the government?

Jean: Yes, at that point we were.

Murray: Was that your major source of money then?

Jean: Yes, it would be by that time, I guess. And I've forgotten just when the grants started to come. Because at first it was mainly United Appeal that we were depending upon.

Murray: Did they actually meet with the board or were...?

Jean: Yes, they did. I couldn't go because I was teaching and this was in the afternoon that they had the meeting. But the two of them met with the board and apparently they told the board that Malcolm was preaching his politics around the Centre too much and that he just had to go. And as some of these articles in the paper state he had already been "forcibly superannuated," as it says here, five months early from his civil service job. At least that's what he said.

Murray: Right.

Jean: And then he was asked to leave the Centre. He did resign so that we didn't have to exactly fire him. It wasn't

exactly a case of, technically it wasn't firing because we didn't want to have to do that.

Murray: How did the board feel about that?

Jean: Well, we certainly didn't want it to happen. We didn't want him to resign. I think he would've resigned earlier in order to keep from it coming to an impasse but we wanted him to stay on so that we would determine whether or not the government was forcing our hand or not.

Murray: Oh I see, so the board was prepared to keep Malcolm and force the government to take its...

Jean: Yeah, just to see if this was what it was planning to do. Because we really didn't want to fire him at all, dismiss him, because there wasn't a cause.

Murray: You were quite satisfied with him.

Jean: Yeah, there wasn't any cause for dismissal as far as we could see. And we felt that, at least I think the majority of the group felt, that there should have been a chance for us to just warn him and say, "Look, just tone down your political talk around the Centre and keep on doing your work," because he did an efficient job.

Murray: Did he change the Centre at all when he became director? Was there a noticeable change in its activities at all?

Jean: Well, of course, it hadn't been functioning very long. Joe Duquette had been the one in charge before and Joe was not an educated Indian whereas Malcolm was. And so there was quite a change that way.

Murray: Did he view its function and purposes differently than other people had?

Jean: I don't know. He might've more from the viewpoint of education but there wasn't too much opportunity just then.

Murray: When he was accused of politicking, was that more encouraging native people to organize or...?

Jean: Oh yes.

Murray: That was the kind of politics that was referred to?

Jean: Oh yes, I'm sure that was it. Because he was a socialist but as he said he didn't belong to any party. I know this is what came out in the paper. "Mr. Norris said that although it is known he is a socialist, he's never held office in any political party and at present does not have a current membership in any party."

Murray: He was defending himself from the charges.

Jean: Yes, but people who knew Malcolm would know that he would talk in exaggerated terms anyway.

Murray: That was his style.

Jean: Oh yes, yeah.

Murray: Was he popular among the native people who frequented the Centre?

Jean: I couldn't say that. I don't really know because I wasn't down there enough to see very many of the native people with him, so I don't really know. But I would think they would be able to tell you that better than I can. He wasn't so popular with some of the whites, I know that. Some of the whites in town. But I think if people got to know him, they would understand just what he was like, they wouldn't object to him. They'd see through his sort of vitriolic nature and see that the bitterness that he had had a cause.

Murray: So he wasn't always a vitriolic man, only when it came to topics that got him upset.

Jean: Oh no, he had quite a sense of humor. He used to always tease me about carrying my shoes in a red bag. I had a plastic bag I carried them in. And he says, "You don't carry shoes in that, you carry your bottle of scotch."

Murray: So he was a kidder, as well.

Jean: Oh he joked. Oh yes, he always joked about things.

Murray: There is one thing I was wondering about. You mentioned that Mr. Duquette was director. Was he director up to the point where Malcolm became director?

Jean: Yes.

Murray: This contradicts something I heard before, and I'm sure you must be right, seeing as you worked for the Centre. I had heard that Pete Tomkins was once the director. Was that...?

Jean: Well, he probably was too, before. But there was a fluctuating in there. And you'd have to get the minutes to get it straight just who was in charge when.

Murray: But Duquette wasn't...

Jean: Duquette was in charge...

Murray: Up to the point where Malcolm...?

Jean: Well, I think he was. Now I'm not sure whether it was Tomkins just before Malcolm or whether it was Joe Duquette just

before. But you'd have to get that straightened out.

Murray: That would have been a paid position would it?

Jean: Yes. Not very highly paid at that time.

Murray: But it was a full-time sort of job?

Jean: Yes. And Joe Duquette did the janitor work and things like that too, you see.

Murray: Is he still in town?

Jean: I don't know. If he is, you should certainly get in touch with him because he could tell you a lot of things and he's an interesting old man. Very interesting.

Murray: Was there any conflict over Malcolm getting the position of director? Was it open at the time or was there a change? How did he become director?

Jean: I imagine it was advertised in the paper the same as we always did later.

Murray: I see, so it wasn't someone being removed from the position so that Malcolm could...

Jean: Oh no, I don't think so.

Murray: It was an open position at the time?

Jean: Oh I think so. I don't recall exactly how that came about.

Murray: But you don't recall any conflict or anything over that?

Jean: No, I don't think so. I don't know. You see, I wasn't very aware of what it was all about in the first few years because I wasn't as involved with it as later on. After a while I was on more committees and understood a little better what was going on.

Murray: Do you recall if Malcolm was active in the Centre after he resigned his position of director? Was he still active?

Jean: He became sick, you know, soon after. So that I don't recall his being there very much after that.

Murray: Was it 1966 that he, or 1965 that he was dismissed, or he resigned?

Jean: Let me see, 1966.

Murray: In the fall or...?

Jean: Well, that one was June.

Murray: That doesn't... I can find that....

Jean: There was a meeting with Steuart on June 9 so it would have been after that.

Murray: So it would have been soon after that.

Jean: Yeah.

Murray: And it was fairly soon after that then that he first took ill.

Jean: Yes, he'd had a heart condition, I guess, for some time.

Murray: What can you tell me about Malcolm as an individual? Could you characterize him for me as you knew him.

Jean: I was always very impressed with his intellectual ability. Since I have been an English teacher all my life, I was really almost astonished to hear how well he handled the English language and his vocabulary was extremely extensive and he had great fluency with the language. I had taught some of his children before this but I hadn't know him until I was down at the Centre. But I had taught some of his daughters at PACI and I'd never thought of them as Indian girls at all really. Because there wasn't such a fuss about Indians at that time, you know, and they, of course, didn't come from a reserve. They lived in Prince Albert and they were active in the drama club and I just thought of them as girls, girls in my drama club. That's all. But they were very bright girls.

Murray: Was there less racism or less tension in those days between native people and white people?

Jean: Well, it's hard to say because there were so few Indians in the school at that time, you see. So that I don't know whether they felt much pressure or not but I never thought there was any pressure on them. But probably they noticed it.

Murray: Right. Was Malcolm a person who was, in all ways, a part of the community as far as socializing and that sort of thing?

Jean: I don't know just how much of a part he took in the community. Because I didn't know him except in the Indian/Metis Friendship Centre.

Murray: Through the Centre.

Jean: Yes.

Murray: Did he ever talk to you much about politics? His political goals for native people, that sort of thing or...?

Jean: Not individually, no. I think he was always complaining about what a bad deal the Indians have had.

Murray: But nothing specific in terms of goals?

Jean: Not that I can remember, except that the Indians should get out and exert themselves and educate themselves and get what they should've received years ago. That seemed to be his main story or theme.

Murray: Was Malcolm, I understood he was a member of a school board at one time. Do you recall that?

Jean: No, I don't. Now, he might have been before I came to Prince Albert, I don't know.

Murray: So it wasn't during...?

Jean: Well, if it was, I don't recall it.

(End of Side A)

(End of Interview)

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