

Malcolm Frederick Norris. (1900-1967)

By Leah Dorion.

Malcolm Norris was the first child of John Norris and Euphrosine Plante. He was born on May 25, 1900 at St. Albert, Alberta. His father was a Scottish settler. His maternal grandparents Xavier and Elizabeth (Belcourt) Plante were a prominent couple in the Metis community at Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta.

The children from his father's previous marriage were antagonistic to their Métis stepmother and her children. As a result, the family lived in two separate homes. Malcolm grew up and received his education in St. Albert from the Sisters of Mercy. He was a good student and fluent in English, French and Cree.

When he was sixteen years old he joined the NWMP and went for training in Regina. He had hoped to join the NWMP squadron going to Siberia to fight the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution. In 1917 the forces implemented a minimum age of 18 for going into this squadron. Thus Malcolm's career ended after training was completed. In 1919, he started working for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) at Fort Vermilion until he grew disenchanted with the trading methods of the company. He left the Company and spent his next five years trapping and trading. Norris trapped near Camsell Portage. In 1922, he married Celina Tardiff and they lived for a time trapping, hunting and trading near Fort Fitzgerald. Norris and his family moved from place to place for many years where he witnessed the terrible conditions of Indian and Métis people in northern communities and the negative impact of the HBC monopoly.



In the twenties, he became an avid socialist and began to fight against bigotry and racism. He often introduced himself as "Redskin Norris". Political turmoil in the 1930s caused Malcolm to become a strong activist, lobbying for Métis rights and social equality. He joined with Métis leaders, Jim Brady, Pete Tomkins, Felix Callihou, and Joseph Dion and together they organized the Alberta Métis Association (Association des Métis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord-Ouest). The meetings were held by taking up a collection from the members, who pitched in what every they could afford.

Norris was the first vice-president of the first Métis organization called the Association des Métis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord-Ouest (Alberta Métis Association). Joseph Francis Dion was president, Felix Callihoo, second vice-president, Pete Tomkins and Jim Brady had the secretary duties. The Association worked as a team and each brought different strengths to the group. Jim Brady was a genius in compositions and writing but he was very soft spoken. Felix had a good command of

French and Tomkins had a real command of the Cree language spoken by the northern Métis. Joe Dion was a well-respected teacher.

Norris had an incredible command of the English language. It was well known in Métis circles that he wrote one sentence with every word in the Webster's Dictionary; which took him over two and one-half years to do. Malcolm is remembered by people as being a straight from the shoulder kind of man. He was ready to sacrifice and do anything for the common cause and for the good of the Métis people.



In 1934, Malcolm Norris acted as the group's spokesperson at presentations made to the Alberta Government's Ewing Commission, which had the task of investigating the social and economic conditions of the Alberta Métis. He had a sharp tongue and quick wit. A fellow Métis leader, Adrian Hope tells one of his remembrances of Malcolm at the Ewing Commission hearings in the 1930s:

He was walking back and forth like as if he was a barrister or a lawyer or something, speaking on behalf of the Métis people. And the judge asked him at that time to condescend down to common everyday phraseology, because the brand of English he was using was really way up there among the skyscrapers. He was running around for dictionaries and encyclopedias and everything else to find out some of the meanings of the words that Malcolm was using. So Malcolm excused himself. He says, "I am sorry, your Honour. When I stepped into this courtroom and seen the British flag hanging there, I knew I had to use the English language. My only regret is, your Honour, that I could not express myself in my mother tongue." He says, "Maybe I could be able to present my case more clearly." Yeah, I felt real proud to be a Métis that day, due to that fact.

Malcolm was involved in obtaining the rights of the treaty Indians and Halfbreeds in Alberta. The chiefs used to call him 'Old Lawyer'. He helped form both the Indian Association of Alberta and the Métis Association of Alberta in the twenties and thirties. He was jailed eleven times for going on Indian reservations. He was a diehard socialist and a tireless organizer.

Norris was eventually rejected by the Alberta provincial government because of his political leanings. He was also disillusioned with the time it took for the Alberta government to implement the Métis colonies. It took from 1933 to 1939 to get the Métis colonies established and the *Métis Betterment Act* passed. When World War II broke out,

the Métis Association of Alberta disbanded and Norris joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.

After the war, he went to work for the CCF party in Saskatchewan, a forerunner for the New Democratic Party. Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris had formed a strong friendship and he brought Brady into the Saskatchewan when the CCF gained power. Norris had high hopes for this newly elected democratic-socialist government.

In 1944, he was hired by the CCF to help them understand the situation of the Native people in Saskatchewan. He also worked for the mineral department of the province of Saskatchewan. By profession he was a geologist.

Norris immediately began travelling Northern Saskatchewan educating and politicizing the Métis people. He became a strong defender of Métis rights and began to organize another Métis association. He was always reading, writing, on the telephone, and writing letters. Brady and Norris told the Métis people about their common goal to have complete economic independence for the northern Native people. They wanted Native people to control the natural resources in the north so they would never have to be dependent on government. These opinions were gained from the failure of the Métis to control the Alberta Métis colony lands and the resources removed from the colonies. Norris advocated for an independent nation with its own land. Malcolm was firmly opposed to the Métis organization taking any money from government.

With the ousting of the CCF government in 1964, Norris was dismissed from his job. He worked in Prince Albert as the director of the Indian-Métis Friendship Centre. He continued to fight for Métis rights and, in 1964, headed the Métis Association of Northern Saskatchewan.

In 1966, Norris suffered a stroke, but he continued his political career from a wheelchair. He moved back to Alberta in 1967 where he suffered another stroke and passed away. Norris is remembered as a brilliant orator and political organizer. Fellow Métis organizer, Don Nielson, referred to Norris as a true Indian socialist and a man of great principles. He was committed to the Métis and Indian cause until the day he died.



James Brady and Malcolm Norris

To be ignored is more vicious perhaps
than to be oppressed.
And this is apparently the form
discrimination takes here (Canada).

Malcolm Norris,
Moose Call, 1965.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute