

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: HELGA M. REYDON  
INFORMANT'S ADDRESS: 73-24th ST. E.  
PRINCE ALBERT, SASK.  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: PRINCE ALBERT,  
SASKATCHEWAN  
TRIBE/NATION: NON-INDIAN  
LANGUAGE: ENGLISH  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: JUNE 15, 1976  
INTERVIEWER: MURRAY DOBBIN  
INTERPRETER:  
TRANSCRIBER: JOANNE GREENWOOD  
SOURCE: SASK. SOUND ARCHIVES PROGRAMME  
TAPE NUMBER: IH-407  
DISK: TRANSCRIPT DISC 100  
PAGES: 13  
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HELGA M. REYDON

Helga Reydon worked for many years for the department of Natural Resources in Prince Albert. She knew Malcolm Norris, Jim Brady and Pete Tomkins.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Malcolm Norris: his personality, his aspirations, his work for the government, his work in organizing the Metis people.
- Jim Brady: his personality and abilities.
- Role of the friendship centres.
- Changes observed in native people over the decades.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Helga Reydon was a long time employee with the provincial Department of Natural Resources and worked directly with Malcolm Norris. She was also acquainted with Jim Brady. In the interview she relates Norris' work in the department - his outspokenness, his personality, his concern for native people and his efforts to get them to fight for their rights.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: I am speaking to Helga Reydon of Prince Albert. Helga, you worked in the same department that Malcolm Norris worked in. Perhaps you could tell us a bit about Malcolm as a person as opposed to his, you know, his actual work. What kind of person was Malcolm as far as your relationship with him?

Helga: Well, as far as my relationship, he was a very warm person. Very intelligent and seeking always. He was searching, it seems. His whole life was a search or a wish to improve the lot of people. And with it all he had a real gentleness. He was a fighter and a gentle person at the same time. And always so well-mannered and really thoughtful in little things. You know, he was, I think, one of the nicest people I've met. I was very, very fond of him.

Murray: Did he talk to you about native people and their problems and his aspirations about politics, that sort of thing?

Helga: Oh yes, yes. He went into that often in great detail and he'd get completely carried away by it and I would say, "Look Malcolm," I said, "things have to move a little slowly. Don't try to do everything today." I said, "It takes time."

And often he would get into some really hot arguments in the office with people. But with me, well, we had a nice relationship and I'd sort of joke and kid him a bit and I'd say, "Oh Malcolm, now just simmer down," and he would. He was really, well, as I say, really a most outstanding person.

Murray: What kinds of work did he do among native people and what kinds of things did he talk about that you just mentioned?

Helga: Well, you know, he talked about the rights that native people should have much more than they - at that time it was just at the beginning. He, I believe, had started in Alberta to organize the native people and from there, as we can see, a great deal has happened. There was Malcolm Norris and Brady. And old Pete Tomkins also was another tremendous character, you know, that did a great deal. And so those three were sort of the forerunner of a great deal that's happening today I would think.

Murray: What kinds of things did they do then that you can see the results now?

Helga: Well, you know, in organizing into their Metis groups and writing. Now, Malcolm wrote many papers and he wrote beautifully. Some of his reports and speeches and so on were absolutely marvelous. And he had often told me of his boyhood in the north, I believe in the Territories. He'd had very little education and had gone north and I'm not sure whether he was with a priest up there that had a beautiful library. And when Malcolm was quite young, he learned appreciation of reading and he read a great deal. He was a great reader of everything. And you know, that, to me, that opened a whole

new world to him of what can be done and thoughts and ideas. He was a philosopher, certainly. And so, in so many ways he was a quite interesting, very interesting man.

Murray: When he spoke to you of native people, how did he refer to them?

Helga: Well, you know, very often that they didn't have a chance, that they were many times discriminated against he felt, which is so in many cases. And he felt that that must change. He was determined there was going to be a change there. And that really was his goal in life, to make sure that there would be no discrimination.

Murray: Was he frustrated by the slowness of the changes?

Helga: Yes, I believe he was. But he never quit fighting, even at the last when he was very ill. I remember him in a wheelchair and he could barely move but his eyes were flashing. And in his first years, when I met him, he was a very handsome man I would think. I always found he looked a bit like Nehru of India. He had that intellectual, bright look about him. Very, very fine looking man.

Murray: What were the things that he was involved in when he worked for DNR? He worked for quite a long period.

Helga: Well, he was involved in the prospectors' schools. I remember he had started one, oh several, in the north. I believe he set up the whole program and it was a very good one. And this went on for a few years and I remember he had some

courses also at the penitentiary. He was teaching the inmates. I went in with him a few times when he had his classes. And a few of those, of the inmates, did go into prospecting after.

And around that time it was quite funny. Well, this prospecting had been going on and there were quite a few people that had taken it. Across the river here in Prince Albert, out of the blue, there was a diamond rush. That was more fun than a picnic in the office, you know. People were staking claims. The whole of the northern part just across the river here of the North Saskatchewan practically was staked in the gravel. They were looking for diamonds in the gravel. And so there would be many people coming in that had never prospected and wanting to know how to stake a claim and all that sort of thing. So that was really one of our duties, was to show them how that was done, and we'd go out and look around where their claims were. And this was the most delightful summer of the diamond rush.

Murray: That ended rapidly did it?

Helga: (chuckles) Yes, it did. Well, they sent away some samples of the gravel but there wasn't anything of any real value. But it was quite funny anyway.

Murray: Did Malcolm work a lot directly with native people or was he working primarily in the office with white people?

Helga: His job was mostly in the north and, of course, there the majority are native people in the north. In the mining there were quite a few although among the prospectors there wouldn't be that many. After the courses there were quite a

few that had taken the prospecting courses and were working for companies and so on. So, he was a very busy man and, as I say, he wrote many very, very marvelous reports.

Murray: Did he consider towards the later years that his work with the department was a success? Did he feel satisfied with that?

Helga: I think he should have because he had accomplished a great deal, you know. He most certainly did, especially in those schools, the prospectors' schools. So, I think he should have felt that. But his overriding thing - I mean, that was his work - but the other thing was to encourage people of native descent to get ahead and go places and have more opportunity for education and everything. And that was just the beginning. I mean, now there's great opportunity for anyone to take courses and all sorts of things. So I would think he can take a great deal of the credit for that because he showed the need and it has been done.

Murray: When do you recall him first working to organize the Metis organization in northern Saskatchewan?

Helga: Here in northern Saskatchewan? I can't be sure of dates there but I would think right from whenever he first came. I didn't know him right at the beginning. I only knew him later on when I was with Minerals, and a little before, a year or two before perhaps, when they had started the friendship centres and that sort of thing. I think, yes, he was one of the ones that helped start that.

Murray: Did he talk to you much about the Friendship Centre and what he saw the role of the Friendship Centre to be?

Helga: Oh yeah, he felt it was a real necessity because the people coming in from all over - reserves or non-treaty Indian and the Metis people - when they came in, they had no place to go or to ask. It's quite different now, but at that time, there were so many things they didn't know. If they wanted to buy something or they wanted... and as far as handling money or making out papers or whatever it was, they didn't have the knowledge, many of them. So to have a place where there was someone that could help them with a lot of these things and help them perhaps with job hunting and that sort of thing, or places to stay. And that is still one of the main roles of the Friendship Centre, I would think.

Murray: Do you recall approximately what year the first Friendship Centre was established in Prince Albert?

Helga: Oh dear, I don't have that. But there would be others as you go on in doing interviews, you'll find. I just forget now. We had this, a dinner and a special day in honor of Malcolm and the Friendship Centre too. Now Alec Primeau and quite a few others would certainly have all that information.

Murray: Let's talk a bit about Jim Brady now. You knew Jim as well, did you?

Helga: Yes. I didn't know him as well. He came and went in the office and I met him in the north at times because at

first I was with the fur division of Natural Resources and I used to travel around quite a bit in the north with Harold Read and we went to trappers' meetings and so on. And I think probably I got to know Jim Brady then at La Ronge and other places. And there was another man that I thought was quite outstanding. He was something of the same type as Malcolm. He was thirsting for knowledge and read a great deal and had a goal in life, too, that he wanted to make the lot better for the native people. Those two people seemed to have... that was the main thing, the thing that kept them going.

Murray: Did you talk to Jim at all? Did he have the same kinds of conversations with you that Malcolm did?

Helga: Oh yes, quite a bit, and I liked him, too. Again, he was another that was so very nice to talk to and gentlemanly. And of course, I found that, all the northern trips I've taken, I've never met nicer people than many northerners, wonderful people.

Murray: What kinds of things was Jim involved with when you knew him?

Helga: Well, he was also involved, I think, in the prospectors' schools. Certainly, I believe he was. And then with Malcolm, I think, in organizing the Metis Society, those sort of things. The two of them were in that together.

Murray: Did Malcolm speak of Jim often to you?

Helga: Oh, yes. You know, as being one of his oldest friends. They were very close, I would think.

Murray: You mentioned earlier that Malcolm had spoken to you of his childhood. Can you try and talk about that a bit and recall some of the things that Malcolm...?

Helga: Well, he was brought up a Catholic, I think, and he got sort of fed up with too much discipline of it and then he became, as far as religion, I would say, a sort of, well, an agnostic I suppose. But his childhood - not his younger childhood he never spoke so much - but as he went north and was

starting to work first and the people, as I say, that were friends of his that influenced him in trying to educate himself. And I believe he worked also for the Hudson's Bay for a while. I'm not positive. Seems to me he said that... My mind is a little foggy on that.

Murray: As a fur buyer perhaps?

Helga: I think so. I think he was with... And then in the mining field up there too, I think.

Murray: Did he talk at all about where and how he became a socialist and how he came to those conclusions at all?

Helga: Well, oh yes. He did. And I didn't always agree with some of his ideas but nevertheless I respected his ideas on that. That was his way. Well I don't want to get into a philosophic talk about those things but he had his own ideas that socialism was the right way. And well, it can be to an extent, and we have a form of socialism now all over the world pretty well, so...

Murray: Did he talk at all about the first people that he talked to to give him these ideas?

Helga: Not really. No, I don't know where that all... it may be from the fact that he felt, because of race, discriminated against and that perhaps, among a group that were socialist and were, you know, took all people as equal, he'd feel more at home. I don't know what it was but yes, I realize he certainly was, you know, that was a great interest to him and was certainly part of his philosophy of life. True.

Murray: How did Malcolm get along with other people in the department? He was obviously an outspoken person. Did he get along with people?

Helga: Well, not everyone. There were people that were afraid of him a bit because he was very sharp and they didn't quite know, you know, where he was. They were just a little bit leery of him at times about, what will Malcolm say next, or rock the boat sort of thing. So he had his difficulties there.

Murray: He wasn't a diplomat?

Helga: No. He would say what he had to say. And some people wouldn't mind that at all and, you know, and others would feel threatened by it. It just depended on the people, I think.

Murray: Did he have a great deal of influence on the policy of the department?

Helga: I would think in many ways he certainly did because he had a very good mind and a very methodical, orderly mind. If he planned something, it was beautifully done. So the depart-

ment was very fortunate to have someone like him. He was excellent.

Murray: Was he involved strictly in the prospecting apprentice plan, that division?

Helga: I think pretty well that, you know, because he was always here. Well, the most policy would have been from Regina, I would imagine. I think it was. As it usually is. But he certainly contributed a lot to our part of the country.

Murray: Was there ever any danger of him being fired from the department for his outspokenness or was he always in a pretty good position as far as his superiors were concerned?

Helga: Well, I think he had a few narrow squeaks from what I can gather. I don't know the details but I think at times he was...

Murray: You can't think of any particular time or what it involved at all?

Helga: No. You know, the fact that he would be quite outspoken. If he didn't approve of certain policies of the department, he wouldn't mince matters about saying what he thought and that, of course, doesn't always make you dearly loved by the bureaucrats.

Murray: Do you think that he ever managed to reverse policies that he felt were detrimental to his people?

Helga: I think he must have because, you know, they were more organized, the people. I'm sure that he had a great influence there. Because fifteen, twenty years ago, the voice of the native people was not very strong and it most certainly is strong today and he certainly would be one of the people that helped make it so.

Murray: Can you see anything in the native organizations or native movements today that has some of the legacy of Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady?

Helga: Oh yes, I would think so, in their organization. And you know, he wanted them to try to learn how to organize, how to administer, which is something that they didn't have the experience. Education was one of the things he stressed very, very much and that certainly has come today. It's such a change to go to a meeting today anywhere in the north or over the southern part of the province dealing with native people and they run their meetings absolutely beautifully, I think. So I think he has been one of the people that started all this - he and Brady and old Pete Tomkins who was another interesting, wonderful person.

Murray: All from Alberta originally.

Helga: Yes. Pete had a great sense of humor, but he made the best pancakes of anybody I know.

Murray: Really. I notice in the writings of Jim and Malcolm that they were often quite witty as well. Do you recall any anecdotes at all about either of them to demonstrate that sort of thing?

Helga: Not really. But they did, they had a beautiful sense of humor. You could have good laughs about things with them. They were lovely people that way, they were wonderful to meet. So I enjoyed it, it was a great thing. I was happy I met them.

(End of Side A)

(End of Interview)

#### INDEX

INDEX TERM	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
DISCRIMINATION				
-against Indians	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	4,10
DISCRIMINATION				
-against Metis	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	4
EDUCATION				
-attitudes toward	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	6,12
EDUCATION				
-technical	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	4-6
METIS				
-political organization	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	3,6,12
POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS				
-Metis Association of Saskatchewan	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	6,8
RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT				
-mining	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	4,5,6,9
URBAN LIVING				
-Friendship Centres	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	6,7
PROPER NAME INDEX				
PROPER NAME	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
BRADY, JIM	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	3,7,8,12
NORRIS, MALCOLM	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	2-13
PRINCE ALBERT, SASK.	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	6,7
TOMKINS, PETE	IH-407	HELGA REYDON	100	3,12