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LIORA SALTER

Liora Salter is a left wing activist who worked in Green Lake with the Neestow Project in the mid-sixties.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Impressions of Jim Brady's political beliefs and aspirations.
- Meeting with Abbie Halkett in La Ronge.
- Differences between organizing Metis people in Alberta and Saskatchewan.
- La Ronge in the 1960s. Problems of the native people.
- Brady and Norris and their connections with the Communist party.
- Local leadership in Green Lake in the sixties.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Liora Salter [nee Proctor] was a freelancer and political activist at the time she met Jim Brady in 1966 in La Ronge. She had a discussion with Brady about the future of native politics in northern Saskatchewan as well as interviewed him for documentaries she was preparing on a similar subject. In the interview she talks about her impressions about Brady and his political views regarding the future of native people in Canada.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: I came across a letter from you to Jim Brady talking about the Neestow Project and I think what you were doing was assuring him that it was not a sort of a government conspiracy or something like that. I think he must have expressed some suspicions. What was his attitude towards the Neestow Project and to the CYC?

Liora: He never specifically talked about that. He was visited first by a friend of mine, Clay Ruby, who had been visiting us in northern Saskatchewan, and they'd gotten along relatively well. I wrote him to say that I wanted to do some interviews - I think that's what it was about - I certainly wanted to meet him. And we were particularly sensitive at that time about the government funding, because that was just at the time CYC became founded. And so it was probably more our sensitivity than his.

Murray: Right.

Liora: One of the things that he talked about at great length was the growth of black power movement in the United States. Which I found fascinating because it was 1965 and no newspapers came into La Ronge on a regular basis and, of

course, no press or television, no radio or television on a regular basis, and here's this guy sitting in a tent and he gives you a treatise on Stokely Carmichael and his relevance. He felt that black power was not a movement that would find a base among native people, and if I remember it correctly - and you may have it on tape, in which case - whether I do or do not remember it correctly - that you needed the concentration of people in the cities in order to build a kind of movement like black power. There was simply no political base to expect something like black power to come out, and no way that native people would come together, in the way that they had come together in the United States around a demand like black power. And I think what was implied in what he said is that you needed a visible community to work from. And that people were so spread and the issues were so spread.

Now remember, when I was there there had been no sign of political activity for many years in Saskatchewan. That was 1965, and the growth of native organizations - whatever their strengths and whatever - this was prior to that development and the only people that were in the Metis Association at the time were people who had been in the Metis Association for twenty or thirty years. And they were a little group of people in each of the communities, maybe four or five people. And Brady was totally cut off from anybody but these four or five people in La Ronge, and there was no political activity in La Ronge. And one of the things that he talked about was the relationship with the DIA there. I think he implied, and he may or may not have been correct, that it was corrupt, a very corrupt organization and that people were so obligated in terms of debts and favors and things, that they really were not in a

position to do very much. And, of course, there was nothing outside La Ronge for people to connect to. So in relationship to that, I don't think the question of government organization was his central problem, it was my central problem that I brought to him. And I don't think we talked about it for very long.

Part of the way that I made contact with him, I came up to his tent and I was with the Quandts. And he had somebody in the tent and I said I wanted to talk to him. And he showed no interest in talking to me. He was not what you'd call a welcoming man. And I said, "I believe you know my dad." My dad was an organizer for the CP. And I said what my name was, and that...

Murray: Broke the ice.

Liora: Broke the ice, and he told me to come back. And in fact, he opened his trunk when we were there and he pulled out all his pictures and stuff like that, and one of the articles in there was written by my father. And that was what forged the bond between us and in fact, the whole question of who I worked for, the government, was more or less irrelevant after the first two minutes.

Murray: Right. You talked a bit about his view of the native movement. Where did he want to see it go? If he had lived beyond a couple of years after, that he did, what would he have liked to see happen? What would his strategy have been, or did he have a worked out, coherent strategy?

Liora: He wasn't broken like Malcolm. He wasn't, you know, just a busted up human being. But he was decidedly cynical and really didn't know or see any potential for any kind of organizing at that stage. And had no allies and was not in the process of organizing at that stage. The things he was doing

at that - I talked to Maria Campbell about him and she says that, you know, like all other people, he had his human sides - but my understanding and from talking to him, he was into kind of helping individual families, you know.

Murray: Always in that, right from the time he was ten years old.

Liora: And, you know, helping them find a place to live. And that's why he was living in a tent; he had given up his house for somebody. And so he wasn't into politics when I was there, but then at the end of the time that I spent with him - which is two or three hours, something like that, it was a whole afternoon - he says, "You go see Abbie Halkett out on the reserve. Why don't you do that." And I had been making absolutely no progress in finding people in La Ronge to talk to. And I don't know if it's relevant to you but I would like to tell you the story of going to see Abbie Halkett. I walked onto the reserve and the reserve was an incredibly cold and

hostile place at that point. And as you know, La Ronge, the reserve is essentially in the middle of town. And the sewer stops on one side and starts on the other and the power stops on one side and starts on the other. And they have to go for water by the truck and they have to pay for water by the barrel. And it was the oldest generation of Indian Affairs houses, the one-room cabins papered inside with newspaper. So I walked down the reserve and I walked real slow. And everybody is out on the door sill and as soon as I walked by they disappeared into the house, just disappeared. So I got to the house that was supposed to be, and I says, "Is Abbie Halkett here?" And there must have been twelve people in the

house, you know, and nobody answered. And I said, "Jim Brady sent me." And all of a sudden everybody came out of every house and I was taken into the house and I was given total freedom to talk. But there was no politics going on.

Murray: But there was. (laughs)

Liora: But there was really an underground of political sentiment going on and it took a long time for trust, but Jim Brady's name was an automatic trust factor. Jim Brady would not have sent me if I was not okay to talk to.

Murray: Right. Did you get to talk to Abbie?

Liora: Yes.

Murray: Where was he politically? Was he a sort of a protege of Jim, or was he a political person?

Liora: He was definitely a political person. Jim was much more fluent in talking with white people, I mean was just more comfortable in that role, so that the conversation didn't go as widely ranging or into politics in the same way that it had gone with Jim. I had the feeling that those two were in some kind of fairly constant contact, that they did have some kind of political vision that they weren't about to spell out, that they saw it as a very long term effort that they might not live

to see the end of. And I don't think that they foresaw their own death, but in the sense of - in 1965 no one saw any movement whatsoever in any of these communities. And Jim's attitude towards...

Murray: Especially in La Ronge.

Liora: Yeah... towards us was kind of a bemused tolerance, you know. Here were these nice young kids and they're really nice kids and isn't it sweet. And I was in Saskatchewan when I heard that Halkett and Brady had gotten lost together. It was not surprising to me, because if one was going to build any kind of action in La Ronge, those are the two kingpins of any action. No question after I left Halkett that that was true. That he was consciously tied in to whatever he and Brady were

thinking about. But I can't give you words that tell me why I knew that to be true, but I knew it to be true.

Murray: But Halkett was going in what Brady would see as a good political direction. I mean he was developing that...?

Liora: Oh yeah, they were, without doubt, allies. How formally they made that, or even felt the need to make that, I don't know. But they were political allies.

Murray: And Brady, of all the people he could have sent you to, he sent you to Halkett.

Liora: Yeah.

Murray: In La Ronge.

Liora: Yeah, he didn't send me to anyone else. If I wanted to understand what was possible politically and why...

Murray: Halkett was the guy who would give you an insight into that.

Liora: On the reserve, yeah. Then it was Halkett and no one else. And it was his suggestion. I didn't ask for somebody to go see on the reserve.

Murray: Right. He mentioned that he didn't see a black power kind of approach being successful as far as the native movement. What did he see in the north? Did he see it as basically an impossible situation in northern Saskatchewan?

Liora: Yeah, it was impossible and, if I remember it right, it also had something to do with the role of the government and a tremendous dependency on the government.

Murray: Right.

Liora: And I think he viewed the people as very broken down and very much suffering under the influence of the colonialism.

Murray: Right.

Liora: And therefore didn't see the potential for a movement. Because when I talked to him about Alberta, he talked with a lot of energy in his voice about the kind of people that they had been working with, and the kind of energy that they'd been putting out.

Murray: Distinguishing that from northern Saskatchewan.

Liora: And said that what had been possible in Alberta, and this is almost a quote, what was possible in Alberta would never be possible in Saskatchewan because there simply weren't the people to do it.

Murray: And he was referring to the thirties when he was in Alberta?

Liora: In Alberta. And I said, "Did you see any possibility of building in Saskatchewan what you saw in Alberta?" And he said, "I never saw that. Right from the word go."

Murray: Right from when he arrived?

Liora: There never were the people here to do it.

Murray: Was he speaking in terms of the people as a whole or in terms of leadership in each community? Or both?

Liora: I would say probably in leadership in each community. What they had in Alberta, as I understand it from him, was a group of five or six people surrounded by a number of people that they could talk to.

Murray: Secondary leadership.

Liora: Maybe twenty or thirty people in the communities that they went out and they did a lot of field work in the Alberta period. What he didn't have in Saskatchewan was either the five, six people or the twenty people and he had never seen it possible in Saskatchewan to build a movement. And they'd come to Saskatchewan because they believed, in the nature of politics in Saskatchewan, that more would be possible there. And also because of things that had happened in Alberta. And had felt immediately that it wasn't and there was only him and Malcolm. He kept saying there was ever only him and Malcolm, there was never anyone else.

Murray: In Saskatchewan, yeah. There was Pete Tomkins, but Tomkins was never...

Liora: He never even mentioned Tomkins, he said there was no one else but him and Malcolm. And I said, "Did you have trouble when you came here getting established, you know, people accepting you because you'd come from somewhere else?" And he said, "Yeah."

Murray: In Cumberland he did, yeah. I remember him mentioning that on another tape too, that he was treated as an outsider for quite a while before he was accepted.

Liora: Yeah, he talked about that.

Murray: Cumberland was a fairly positive community, I think. One of the few in the north. Did he mention that at all?

Liora: Yeah, he did.

Murray: Trying to jog your memory. (laughs)

Liora: (laughs) Jog my memory, jeez. This is twelve years ago - my God! One conversation, sure a memorable one, but still.

He talked about Cumberland, but all I remember him saying is that he was an outsider in Saskatchewan and that he and Malcolm had never been able to have roots there.

Murray: I wonder if he was conscious of the possibility that it might have been because they were connected with the CCF?

Liora: No. He talked about the Communist game that was played, about people treating him as CP. As you know, there's a whole tradition of the CCF that's afraid of the left.

Murray: Red-baiting.

Liora: And I think that, if I remember correctly, he attributed some of his rejection to the Red-baiting within the CCF.

Murray: Right. There's two things that I want to pursue a bit. You mentioned he saw people as being colonized. Could you elaborate on that a bit?

Liora: He actually used the word. That's his word.

Murray: Right, right. Well, he certainly knew the history of the colonial struggle in Africa and in Asia.

Liora: And he made reference to it. I mean, that was the amazing thing, you'd be sitting in this blooming tent, eh, (inaudible) of Lenin on the bookshelf, and he's talking to you about Africa, and he's talking to you about the United States, and you're in the middle of the blooming bush.

Murray: This is something that I've just recently sort of seen in the two men, that struggling with the colony within was their frustration, I suppose. What do you do with a colonized people when the colonizers outnumber them?

Liora: I just think he was totally defeated by the problem. And I guess, if I'd lived in La Ronge at the time, I would have been defeated, too.

Murray: La Ronge would defeat almost anyone, I think, especially La Ronge.

Liora: La Ronge as opposed to Buffalo Narrows and places like that.

Murray: Took the brunt of colonialism, I think.

Liora: And had all the sharp contrast between the tourists and the wealth and the poverty, whereas you're in other

communities like Green Lake there's a consistency, all the way through the same. And the odd people who aren't the same are a handful of civil servants. But in La Ronge there's a white, wealthy community. And he talked a little bit about the thirteen-year-olds who were being dragged into prostitution, which really upset him.

Murray: Was that something that would have been just developing more recently?

Liora: No.

Murray: Did you get that impression that it had been going on for years?

Liora: Yeah, and that was one of the things that most upset him about La Ronge and about what was going on there, is that twelve and thirteen-year-old girls would enter into the service of the tourist trade.

Murray: Yeah. Quite often, which would be even more frustrating for him, at the encouragement of their parents? Not quite often, but often enough.

Liora: Yeah. He didn't talk about that, I mean, that may be true but he didn't talk about that, but he did talk about the tourist trade, and what it did. He never talked about alcohol, which is part and parcel of colonialism. But he did talk about that.

Murray: Yeah. I know that he was a member of the Communist party. I'm not sure if he was right until he died or not. Did he talk about the party at all?

Liora: You know, there's a whole crew of people who for many years would not admit that they were members of the party. When I talked to Jim Brady, my sense was that he also would not admit that he was a member of the party, whether he still was or not. My understanding was that he and Malcolm were to the end. And the reason that I say that is that people that I knew who were in the party always made it a point to stop and visit, which, knowing the party, they would not have done if people had left the party, period. There's an excommunication problem there and if Malcolm had left they would not continue to visit him every time they went through town.

Murray: Yeah, yeah. Like Norman Brudy and Phyllis Clarke and...

Liora: And the Marsons(?) you see, who were very close to me and my family. If you can call it Communist godparents; they were my godparents.

Murray: Right. I was quite certain that Brady was a member of the party, but I was never that sure about Malcolm.

Liora: I'm convinced of it. And there were certain patterns that, you know, partly the literature that was around and in that trunk. There was stuff on Dumont in that trunk, there was pamphlets on Tim Buck's material was in that trunk, the pamphlets on my dad were in that trunk. And partly because the way the issues were framed. The notion of native people being in colony was, of course, their own, but it was also very much part and parcel of the party.

Murray: Right.

Liora: The notion of the enslavement of women as part of that was also very much talked about at the party at that time, and prior to that. So that even the issues that were picked up upon were issues that I knew from my whole history, and I had no question that he was a member of party.

Murray: From talking with your father and other party members, did Jim contribute to the party's understanding of the native thing or not?

Liora: You may be getting my prejudices about the party here, but my guess is that the way the party treated Malcolm - Jim less, I don't think most people knew him, you know, he's way up there, it's quite a (inaudible) to La Ronge - was that they viewed him as somebody they'd wanted to support, but not somebody they could learn from. There's a certain inherent deep racism in the party.

Murray: Right, right.

Liora: And Malcolm was always somebody you visited and gave support to, but not somebody you learned from, other than to say, yes, that was an important issue, we should organize on that. So my experience in the party, neither Malcolm nor Jim were ever given any credibility as thinkers or as contributors to an analysis.

Murray: Yeah. And I'm sure they felt that, they must have known that to some extent.

Liora: Oh, sure. Anybody in the party knew where they were at. I mean, there's a hierarchy in the party in terms of theoretical sophistication and you knew exactly where you stood in that order.

Murray: It's like being sat down at a certain spot in the table. (laughs)

Liora: And you were sat down quite far down the table. And Malcolm was visited every time people went through, but people did not go to visit Malcolm except in relationship to the constituency that they thought he held. That I do know. A little bit of my own prejudice comes out.

Murray: Well I think, I think that I've got that feeling from others who've talked about him, too. And I think that's one of the reasons they didn't put a great deal of their own energy into the party. I think that they were associated with it, and members, but not...

Liora: I think they were associated with the party. I think the party did relatively little for them.

Murray: Yeah.

Liora: It's one thing to have them on the bus tour stop, you know, that you go across the country. But there's no indication from my history in the party that they ever were given real support that the party was quite capable of giving a leader that they wanted to build, a whole base of volunteer workers. And then the party can outwork anybody. A whole white support structure, and it was never provided to those people. And I don't know why. Whether they were considered theoretically wavering, which is what my guess is, or whether it was a racism inherent, where the party really didn't want to put that kind of energy into that situation at that time. I'm not privy to those discussions, but it would have been one of those three.

Murray: Yeah.

Liora: But then, I mean, the party could have come behind them quite easily and built them up, not within their own communities but within the white communities as spokespeople.

Murray: Right.

Liora: Especially for the fact that they were not openly in the party and therefore were very useful to the party. And it could have done that.

Murray: Yeah. They were the kind of people that the party would normally have used.

Liora: Normally have picked up and used and written about and developed a whole bunch of white support organizations around, and they never did.

Murray: It would seem to me that both Malcolm and Jim were theoretically sound, I mean in terms of what the Communist party would see. They certainly were well-read.

Liora: They certainly were well-read, but they were pretty independent minded.

Murray: Yeah.

Liora: And it was a matter not so much of whether they were theoretically off, but whether they were theoretically trustworthy.

Murray: Right, right.

Liora: And they built their own organization and were responsible to their own constituency, and I really believe that. They never succumbed to the temptation to become the Indian rep, if you will, within the left.

Murray: They were revolutionary democrats, I think, which may have been inimical to the party.

Liora: And I think they would have been very much rejected by the party as not quite trustworthy. And all the proof in the world exists that they never got the support they should have had.

Murray: Yeah. Did both men consider themselves Leninists in the sense of supporting that kind of a party? I'm wondering if they dealt with it at that level when talking to you?

Liora: I don't know the answer. In my head I have a sense that Brady did talk about the need for a party.

Murray: Norris less likely. My guess would be that Norris would be less likely.

Liora: But I don't remember what he said. And it was not on tape. We did an hour on tape and two hours off tape. So some I remember more because it was on tape and I heard it after. But the fact that he had Lenin on his bookshelf and nothing else, frankly, and all that readily available, not in a house but in a tent, seems to me that he considered it...

Murray: He carried that with him obviously. From all his library he chose that.

Liora: That was what he took with him and that's what he had. It seems to me that makes him a Leninist. And yet he didn't act like one. His strategy politically wasn't...

Murray: Wasn't a vanguardist sort of strategy?

Liora: No, but then I was there when he was defeated.

Murray: Right, right. Well, as early as 1961 he described himself as a tired radical, so he'd been tired for quite a while by the time you talked to him. Did he talk at all about the China-Soviet split?

Liora: No. Not that I remember.

Murray: I presume that he had a Marxist analysis of the NDP as being, you know, typical of social democratic parties.

Liora: He did not talk in any analytical way about the CCF. What he gave me to understand is that they had been so

concerned with Red-baiting that that had affected what they could and could not do, that the CCF had been terrible on the native question and had never taken the trouble to court native leadership and develop native locals. The CCF was not powerful in La Ronge and would never find a base there.

Murray: In one of his letters he said that the Indian and Metis people detested, universally detested...

Liora: That's just the ground rule. So that's what he talked about with the CCF and he never talked about it in the big analytical terms. I'm sure he could have - about social democracy or something like that. He talked much more critique of their racism, critique of their inability to see that there was a constituency here and that these were people.

Murray: Yeah. And he would have related that to a general colonial sort of attitude, I suppose?

Liora: Yeah, yeah. And we talked a lot about Green Lake, which was a perfect example of colonialism, because it was the model plan of the CCF that was developing more or less without any understanding of the local conditions. And was therefore a total and complete flop.

Murray: Right.

Liora: And so we talked about the fact the CCF had never put the work into listening to what people want.

Murray: Can you recall any detail of what he said about Green Lake? Or the history of it?

Liora: No. My guess is I did most of the talking on that. I mean, I knew the history of Green Lake (inaudible) station.

My guess is that that was my contribution to the conversation, my experience there. He did know the people in Green Lake, because there was a little group in Green Lake who had been with the Metis Association for twenty, thirty years.

Murray: Like Bishop?

Liona: Like the Fiddlers, and like Virginia Morand, and, interesting enough, like Dan Ross, who later went over to the Liberals.

Murray: So he was the first president of the Green Lake local in '64-'65?

Liona: Yeah, right. And Ross was the people who had invited us to go there. Irony of ironies. My understanding of the Bishops is that in those days they weren't central, and certainly when I lived in Green Lake the Bishops were nowhere to be seen. And Rod Bishop came back at the very end of when I left, which was June '65. And that was the first he knew what was going on at Green Lake at all, in terms of the Metis

Association.

Murray: He'd been in B.C. or something like that?

Liona: Yeah, and he had not been involved. That was the beginning of his decision to move heavily into the political organization, but prior to that he hadn't, and he moved in around the survival of the Neestow Project. So when I went to see Brady, I didn't know Rod Bishop very well. He hadn't been part of what I'd seen or worked with. Brady only barely knew the people in Green Lake, and he had no particular good words for Bishop. That doesn't mean he had negative words for Bishop, he didn't have any...

Murray: He didn't centre him out as being...?

Liona: You know a lot of people at that point were saying, "Here's our new leadership. He's young and energetic and got some kind of analysis and a good person." I think including me. But I do know that Brady did not view Bishop that way. Now that doesn't mean he viewed him negatively.

Murray: But he didn't see him as with great potential?

Liona: No. No way. And it was kind of amazing to me that he didn't know the people in Green Lake who had been active for thirty years.

Murray: Norris knew.

Liona: Yeah.

Murray: But Brady didn't.

Liona: But Norris was not close to them, and they never talked about Norris. In all the months that I was there, and I was organizing all the way through, they never talked about Norris, except, you know, that he's ill. But they never viewed him as any kind of leadership. I think the people in Green Lake had viewed themselves very much on their own for a lot of years, and without any outside support.

Murray: Because Norris had come and had held a couple of meetings in Green Lake.

Liona: Yeah, there were people in Green Lake talked about when Ray...

Murray: Woolen?

Liona: Woolen, maybe, had gone to Green Lake and there'd been a flurry of organization at that time and there had been a number of meetings, and the Metis Association got going and at that point Norris had come to Green Lake. But people in Green Lake viewed that as a temporary and, in fact, almost retrogressive thing because he'd come and he'd gone, you know,

the way people did come and go.

(END OF SIDE A)
(END OF TAPE)

* The tape is finished but the following notes are listed on the summary:

NOTES:

There was no sense of identification with Norris - and almost a sense that they felt Norris had moved into the white world. It was because of his connection with the CCF - which they had no use for and viewed as a white peoples' organization. They saw him almost as a white man.

He viewed the Friendship Centre firing as a very personal thing - with all the good will he had built up in the community among whites and when it came to the crunch, they didn't give him any support.

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