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CARL CHRISTENSON

Carl Christenson, through his work for the Saskatchewan Fish Board, met both Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Saskatchewan Fish Board: its aims and its functioning.
- His acquaintance with Norris and Brady.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Carl Christenson worked for the Saskatchewan Fish Board and started about February, 1947. Through his government work he got to know Malcolm Norris.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: I am talking to Carl Christenson of Prince Albert. Carl, when was the first time you met Malcolm Norris and what were the circumstances? You were working for the government at the time were you?

Carl: I was working for the original Saskatchewan Fish Board at that time and I had just started in February, 1947. And I think this was about the fifth of March in 1947 and Ted Williams, who was buying for the Saskatchewan Fish Board at that time, and Bill Grant who was their accountant at that time, took me up first to La Ronge and then across to Beaver Lake. And we landed at Deschambault and, as I recall, the store had just burned down. No, perhaps that was a little later. But

there was a little log shack that they were using for a store. Well, the store was run by the Saskatchewan Fish Board at that time too, the trading post. And Malcolm was on loan from the department temporarily, running the store. And we popped in there for a few minutes and then went on to Beaver Lake.

Murray: How long did Malcolm work in that store? Do you know? Was it a short time or...?

Carl: I think it was just a matter of a few weeks or a couple of months, as I recall.

Murray: When did those stores first start up?

Carl: Well, the Saskatchewan Fish Board bought out the - I'm trying to think of the name - Jack Eanerson had a trading post there and bought fish there and the Saskatchewan Fish Board bought his premises out which included the trading post, I believe. Then they later bought out the trading post of Shorty Russell in Pelican Narrows, I think in the next year or two.

Murray: Jim Brady worked in Pelican Narrows at that store. When did you first meet Brady?

Carl: I think I first met Jim in Cumberland House. He was assistant to Joe Johnson there, who was the field officer for

the DNR at Cumberland. And I think we went down there for a load of sturgeon and Jim was supervising the weighing and packing of it.

Murray: What would his job have been at that time?

Carl: Well, I think he was - I suppose they called him a patrolman with the DNR. And then he worked for the Fish Board at Deschambault after that. He received and weighed and packed the fish to be loaded on the aircraft.

Murray: But was he in Cumberland first or in Deschambault to start with? Do you recall that?

Carl: No, I'm just not too sure now. It just could have been that he was at Deschambault first. I believe that's correct, yes. Because he later became, when Joe Johnson was transferred from Cumberland, Jim became the conservation officer there.

Murray: Right. What kinds of things was the government trying to do in regards to commercial fishing? Could you give me a bit of detail on that?

Carl: Well, the establishment of the Saskatchewan Fish Board was the runner up of a royal commission on fisheries which was, I think, headed by Gus McDonald. And I believe Bert Mansfield was involved with the commission too, yes. And the Saskatchewan Fish Board was already established when I came. They had built the plant at La Ronge I think the previous year or two, 1945, 1946. And the plant at Beaver was in operation,

Beaver Lake. At that time, they were the only filleting plants in the province besides Waite Fisheries at Buffalo Narrows and Dory Lake. I think they had one at that time.

Murray: What was the government trying to do by involving themselves with the Board? What were the goals of the Board?

Carl: Well, I imagine it was something of the same problems of today, trying to stabilize the industry and stabilize the market. And at that time, the remote areas were only accessible to markets, that is only economic through fish in the wintertime. The winter operation was the natural freezing and overland transportation.

Murray: Otherwise it was too expensive to transport the fish by air.

Carl: That's correct. Occasionally a fisherman would have an aircraft during the summer or he may have been doing something else in the summer. But you would perhaps have an aircraft come in to bring him supplies and send out fish and that to share the load, share the cost, but basically it wasn't very economic.

Murray: So the fishing was primarily winter fishing in those areas?

Carl: That's correct and even at that time it was too, except where the plants were located. The catswings were the thing from Wollaston, Reindeer, and into La Ronge too from Pine Oaks and the outlying areas. And of course, the other thing was the infestation of whitefish which made plants necessary. They could no longer export some of the whitefish into the States.

Murray: Because there was cysts and things in the fish, was it?

Carl: Right.

Murray: What was the effect of the Board on stabilization in the first few years? Did it have a positive effect?

Carl: Well, as I say, I wasn't here at the outset.

Murray: By 1950s then.

Carl: Well, by 1949, the results to the fishermen probably weren't all that great because of... well, I suppose it was a new venture and they weren't, perhaps, the more lucrative fishing operations absorbed some of the cost. And as a result, they reorganized in 1949 into the Saskatchewan Fish Marketing Service. And as I recall, they organized it on an area basis and had only central service charge, or fee if you like, for selling and administration. And then each area received the proceeds of the result of the product from their operation.

Murray: Do you think fishermen got generally a better deal once the board and the operation was going? Did it accomplish its goals of stabilizing?

Carl: Well, I think that without processing plants... I think that was the first move. Without processing plants close to the source, there were large production of whitefish in the La Ronge area and the Beaver Lake area that could not have been

utilized otherwise. And in Reindeer Lake, the whitefish came under the - well, I don't think it was actually classified as B whitefish but on the market in the summer particularly, it may as well have been because you had trouble exporting it. And this made it possible to fish Reindeer the year round in those years. There were some good producers on the lake.

Murray: Did it result in an increase in the number of people making a living off commercial fishing?

Carl: Oh, I don't think there was any doubt about that. Up to that point, I don't think there were too many - I don't know what you would describe them as - self-sufficient fishermen, that is fishermen with their own outfits. I think to a large degree, the fishermen were fishing for someone else. A packer or a buyer, he more or less supplied the nets and the equipment in a lot of areas and I think, for the first time, a lot of them became independent.

Murray: Their own bosses.

Carl: Independent operators in a sense.

Murray: Could you describe what Malcolm's role was in northern Saskatchewan? I know he worked for the Prospectors' Assistance Plan and that sort of thing but did he have a broader role than that? Was he involved in sort of selling programs to the people? What did you view him doing?

Carl: Well, I'm not that familiar with Malcolm's work except my contact with him on the east side of the province there in the earlier years. Except I probably saw him, oh, two or three times a month. Well, when our office was in the provincial building, I saw him every day. And I really don't know but I know he was involved with the prospectors' plan and I can recall some of his stories on his early work in Alberta in organizing the Metis people.

Murray: Did he refer to that quite often?

Carl: Well, I can recall him and Jim Brady talking about that.

Murray: Both of them. Did they express hopes that could happen here as well?

Carl: I can't recall. I think they did a bit of that kind of work here.

Murray: What kind of man was Malcolm? How did he strike you, his personality and how he related to people?

Carl: He was a very intelligent man, both him and Jim. I don't know what their formal education was but they were certainly well self-educated. I know we used to refer to both Malcolm and Jim as using sixteen-cylinder words. (laughter) And they knew how to use them and where to use them. Well, I think Malcolm, I suppose you might call him fairly aggressive but I don't know if I would describe him as a militant. I think he was a moderate man in his way and a persuasive man.

Murray: Did he have a lot of influence with people he was in contact with do you think?

Carl: I think he did. Perhaps you know, at meetings and public meetings and whatnot. Maybe he wore his influence a little thin by overstating his case sometimes, but I think he was for the most part respected and that he was sincere.

Murray: Right. What about Jim Brady's approach to things? How would you characterize him?

Carl: Well, Jim was like Malcolm, he was quite a vocal individual. I can remember some of his stories from Alberta. I think he helped or he managed the Fishermen's Cooperative, as I recall, at Lac La Biche at one stage. And I can remember him discussing some of the early homesteaders I suppose in that area where someone was going to take the farmer's machinery away. And this is one of his stories where this farmer said that, I guess he meant the chair for the rifle or something. And he said he was going to defend his family's right to a living and the means of making a living. So he says, "If you think it's worth coming any further for the bank that you represent, why just come ahead." (chuckles) He was prepared to save for his family. So, those are the kind of stories he seemed to relish.

Murray: Jim wasn't involved in that incident?

Carl: No, no. Defense of the common man, I guess, was the point he was making.

Murray: Right. Did they talk to you much about their political activity or it was basically a friendship through work that you knew the two men?

Carl: I think so. It was so many years ago that I suppose if they were alive today, both them and myself, probably would have mellowed since that time and you kind of forget. But I think they were quite active, particularly Malcolm I think, in the political campaigns.

Murray: Do you remember him being active in campaigns in

Prince Albert at all?

Carl: Well, I wasn't in Prince Albert very much in those years. Well, I was in later years but, oh, I think he was, all right. Maybe more so in the north but I know they used to have some meetings at probably Cumberland House, Flin Flon area and I think Malcolm used to come to some of those. I'm not that familiar with what his political activities were. You know, Malcolm wasn't anyplace very long before he let people know what he was thinking and what his views were. There was no question about that.

Murray: What was your impression of his feelings about his native ancestry? How did he deal with that?

Carl: Well, he'd make comments sort of about the redman, redskins and I think Redskin Norris is what he called himself, I think. I think he was proud of his native ancestry. But of course, he had a dual ancestry. Sometimes you felt he was apologizing for one, but I don't know which one.

Murray: There was a defensiveness was there or a...?

Carl: I don't think so. It's hard to describe. Let's put it this way, he was like the Scotsman, he told the jokes on himself. (chuckles) Now whether that was his approach to break the ice and to open up people to speak, it probably was. I don't think he was defending his ancestry. I don't think he felt he had to.

Murray: Right. But it was always something that was right at the surface when he was talking.

Carl: But he didn't pretend his ancestry was other than it was. And he was proud of it and well he might be.

Murray: Was Brady as... did he have the same approach about his ancestry or was it a different sort of approach?

Carl: I don't think that he opened up the matter at all, as a joke or any other way. I don't think he even considered it, you know.

Murray: He didn't talk about his ancestry.

Carl: No, I think Jim just took it for granted that all men were created equal. He never, not that I can recall.

Murray: So, that was quite a different approach on the part of the two men?

Carl: Well, Malcolm seemed to bring out the subject, you know. He called himself a redskin. I don't know whether he - maybe he would have preferred that he didn't have any white ancestry. I don't know. But he always seemed to use that approach in a jocular way.

Murray: Right.

Carl: Which is an effective way, too.

Murray: Getting back to the fisheries part for a minute, were there any developments over the years, during the fifties or sixties, where there was any dramatic changes? Or once the Board and the Marketing Service were established, did things go pretty smoothly from that point? Or were there changes and crises or developments, anything of that nature, over the years?

Carl: Well, there was a crisis in 1949 when they reorganized the... well, I think the board of directors, the Fish Board, had some problems and they had developed some basis of, I don't know, one or two cooperatives formed, I think. And they had started to develop local organizations. And from there, they brought out this concept of this central organization with each area paying a fixed fee. And establishing initial payments which were guaranteed with the province.

Murray: Right.

(Break in Tape)

Carl: Well, I suppose the fishing industry has always had problems but it seemed like this operation with a guaranteed initial payment worked out quite well. The fisherman knew whether or not he could afford to fish and of course, things have changed so much then. Costs have changed so drastically and...

Murray: Was the fisherman better off in 1955 than he is now, do you think?

Carl: Well, it's pretty hard to say.

Murray: In terms of net income?

Carl: In terms of fish alone, he probably - it's hard to say. He probably ended up less likely to be in debt at the end of an operation than now because... mind you, costs were much lower then I suppose. I don't know what the initial wages were in 1955 but I don't know whether they were much more than 75 or 80 cents an hour at that time. Nets were cheaper and gas and motors of course, were much, much cheaper. Probably he didn't have as good a living now but the net result of his fishing operation was probably better in a sense.

Murray: In 1955?

Carl: Yeah.

Murray: Because the price of fish hasn't gone up nearly as much as the costs.

Carl: I'm not sure, I wouldn't want to pin that down to any

particular year.

Murray: But in that period, yeah.

Carl: I don't think debt was as much of a problem then. Then of course, as I say, probably part of the fishing was a fairly mainstay industry. They didn't have as much diversification and generally speaking, if a fellow didn't fish this year, you didn't worry all that much about his account, for example, because he's pretty likely to be back next year or the year after. But now it's a little different. There is different projects, construction and mining and you just don't know. Your fishermen are going to be from year to year.

Murray: Right. Are there as many people fishing now as there were in those years?

Carl: I don't think there are, no. There may be a few bigger producers but...

Murray: Numbers are down?

Carl: Numbers are down.

(End of Side A)

(End of Interview)

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