G: Okay, now today we're going to talk to Andrew Swimmer from Sweet Grass. He used to be the chief on Sweet Grass. Andrew has made quite a few headlines because he took on the government over the Medicine Chest provisions of the treaties.

- When his father, the chief of the Sweet Grass Reserve, died, Andrew became chief for one year. He resigned because of disagreements with Indian Affairs. Made headlines when he refused to pay medicare and fought the federal government in court for the rights of off-reserve Indians to free health care.

- Fights by his father to retain Indian Hospital.
- His court case against the federal government to retain free health care for Indians living off the reserve.

**HIGHLIGHTS:**

- When his father, the chief of the Sweet Grass Reserve, died, Andrew became chief for one year. He resigned because of disagreements with Indian Affairs. Made headlines when he refused to pay medicare and fought the federal government in court for the rights of off-reserve Indians to free health care.

- Fights by his father to retain Indian Hospital.
- His court case against the federal government to retain free health care for Indians living off the reserve.
Isn't that right? Isn't that what it was called?

S: Right.

L: You were born in 1911?

S: Yes. 1911, November 20.

L: Let's see, that would make you 62 years old.

S: Yes, this coming fall I'll be 63 years old.

L: Ah, did you have any schooling?

S: Well, not very much.

L: Grade 5 or 6?

S: No. Just one, on account of I had to go to the hospital, the sanatorium. After that, I didn't go back to school. I worked with my dad at the farm. So, by working with outside people, that's where I got my English. Speak and work with them up to this day.

L: Uh, you had less than a year at school?

S: Right.

L: And you spent a year at the sanatorium.

S: Well, eleven months.

L: Eleven months. When you were a boy?

S: In Ft. Qu'Appelle.

L: You've been kinda sick all your life, huh?

S: Well, I never been strong since I got out of the sanatorium. But as I said, I worked at the farm with Dad, and grew up like that. I was a working man. I finally got married and raised a family, and I tried to support them in the best way I can. They're all grown up now, on their own. Some are making good, and some are not too good, but mostly on their own anyway. I haven't got too much worries about that.

L: In spite of all that, you were elected chief at one time on Sweet Grass.

S: Yes.

L: Well, when was that?

S: Well, that was, that would be, let's see, I'd say 1955. Because Dad died on the twenty-third of December, 1954. So we mourned for one year, as I said last night, before another
chief could be elected. So I ran as chief, and I don't remember the man's name that I ran with. But I was nominated as chief. So that lasted about a year and a half, on account I didn't make too good with the Department of Indian Affairs.

G: Was your father elected as chief?
S: Yes.
G: How long was he chief?
S: 29 years.
G: That's a long stretch, eh?
S: Well, he was life-time chief.
G: Yeah, but he was elected at first, eh?
L: That must have been in 1925.
S: Somewhere in there, yeah. He was chief almost 30 years. Where he died is where he had worked, at this hospital, to make the hospital as it is now, that's where he had died.
G: Yeah, you told us last night that he had some problems trying to keep the hospital open. Maybe you could tell us about that again.
S: Yes, it was the government, the federal government decided to give us a hospital, and it was years, you know. And Dr. Head was our doctor for this area here, at the Battleford Agency. So he was the one who was working on this Indian hospital. In the middle of it all, they decided to close it.
G: This was the federal government, eh?
S: Yes. And then Dr. Head came to see Dad about it.
G: Do you remember when that was; what year?
S: No, I don't really. Don't remember.
L: It must have been in the 1950s.
S: Somewhere in there, yeah, I would think.
L: Well, he died in 1954. It must have been late 1940s or early, very early 1950s.
G: Did they say why they wanted to close it down or anything like that?
S: No, it was costing them too much money - for the federal government.
G: So what did they do then to keep it open?

S: Well, Dr. Head came to see Dad about it.

G: You were there, eh?

S: Yes, I was there, and Dad said, "Well, I'll put up a meeting, and we'll discuss it there. I'm sure that we need a hospital. We'll have a meeting and we'll decide then what we should do." We decided that we wanted the hospital to continue. So from then on, they decided for Dad to travel around the Battleford Agency, the other reserves. So they decided they'd do the same thing. Each reserve. So there was a petition, like they made from each reserve.

G: You mean when they divided up, all the bands up at first?

S: Well, we each have a reserve, right?

G: Yeah.

S: But, as I said, the majority of the people on the reserve decided they wanted to have an Indian hospital. So they gathered all these papers from each reserve and they sent them to Ottawa, through a lawyer. So they wrote back that they would continue the hospital. So that's how it exists at present.

G: Oh, that was lucky, eh?

S: Right.

G: Can you remember anything else that your father did when he was chief that sticks out in your mind?

S: Well, there was another time, about 4 or 5 years afterwards that they decided to close it again. So Dad - Dr. Head came to see Dad again. And Dad said the same thing over again, "I'll do the same thing that I did before." He set up a meeting again at the Sweet Grass Reserve, and decided, the people decided to get Dad to go around to each reserve and do the same thing as he did before. And so they repeated the same thing over and sent a letter to Ottawa, and they decided to have the hospital continue.

G: And what about Dr. Head. Does he still live in Battleford?

S: No, I believe he lives in Vancouver, away somewhere, and I heard he was blind now.

G: Oh, yeah.

L: He'd be a very old man.

S: Yeah. He was really, he was really for the hospital. He had feelings toward the Indian people, you know.
G: Well, that makes a big difference, eh?

S: Yeah, he really worked hard for us people, and everybody knew him and liked him.

G: What were the doctors like at the San? I know some people there. I think Dr. Ferguson was there?

S: Yes, I know him well.

G: And Dr. Swanton, Dr. Jenner?

S: Well, I don't really know the others. But I know Dr. Ferguson. He used to come and visit at the Indian Hospital at the time I was working there. He was my doctor.

G: He was, eh?

S: That was when I was in the San, at Ft. Qu'Appelle.

G: Yeah, I saw a thing there in the museum at Ft. Qu'Appelle. It was like a certificate from the bands - there's some reserves around there you know, saying that they really liked the work that he was doing for them.

S: That was Dr. Ferguson?

G: I think it was Dr. Ferguson.

S: Or Dr. Hammond?

G: It could have been him too. Did he work at Ft. San too?

S: Maybe both of them together - for us people.

G: So then you were chief in 1955?

S: Yeah, 1955, and it only lasted about a year and a half. Every time an individual wanted something through the chief and council, it came to me. I came to Battleford to see if I couldn't get this thing for this individual, or groups. All I got was "No," - Indian Affairs, you know. So I got tired of being the chief, trying to - because I got 'no' all the time. So I made up my mind to resign. So I came to Battleford and told the Indian agent, "I want to resign." "Why?" he said. "Well, every time I come here, all I get is 'no' from you people. No use being a chief like that. I want to resign." "Oh, don't resign," he says. "We like you." (laughter) "That isn't the point. You like me all right, but you don't say yes on what I want," I said.

G: "How much do you like me?", eh? (laughter)

S: They tried to persuade me not to resign. But I made up my mind. I did resign.

G: Then when was that, when you resigned?
S: Well, that was in about 1956.

G: What kind of problems would these people come to you with then, that you would bring to Battleford?

S: Well, they would want to do something about farming, or raising cattle, or horses; in that category, you know. It wasn't something bad that they wanted. It was going to be something good for the reserve, and something good for the individual. All I got was 'no' from the Department of Indian Affairs.

G: Can you recall any examples of the sort of things that they wanted?

S: Well, it was horses, cattle, and they wanted to farm. They wanted equipment, and I guess the department thought it was too big a risk at that time.

G: Who was the agent there?

S: By the name of Ostrander.

G: He was a white man, eh? Not a Metis?

S: Yeah.

G: So what did they do when you resigned? They had another election right away, did they?

S: Well, afterwards, you know. I don't recall what really happened. I just forgot it all.

G: Yeah, you probably didn't care too much, the way you'd been treated at the Department of Indian Affairs.

S: So I don't remember who was chief after that. Do you remember, Alphonse?

L: I wonder if it wouldn't be Jimmy Favel.

S: Could have been. Yeah, I was trying to make a living.

G: You were farming then?

S: I was farming then, yeah.

G: Did you have anybody to help you out then?

S: Well, Dad and I used to work together. But after he died, I was alone, you know. You know I wasn't too well, and I didn't make too good at farming.

G: That's hard work, eh?

S: Finally landed at the Indian hospital as a maintenance man,
there, you know, for a number of years.

G: Like steam engineering, that sort of thing?

S: Yes, boiler man, plumbing, electric work, day shifts, evening shifts, night shifts. I carried around a punch clock. You punch clocks, you know. Every set of keys was different. I mean where you plug in the key, you know. This key fit every place, but it punches differently - sheet of paper.

G: So they'd know you'd been around then, eh?

S: You'd been around - search an hour or two. That's how it happened there.

G: Did you have to have any papers for that? Journeyman papers?

S: Yes. Boilerman papers.

G: Where did you go to get them?

S: Well, they came to me, you know, at the Indian hospital, and I just renew them there, you know, every year.

G: So you were living off the reserve then, eh?

S: Yes, I got along good with them there.

L: How long were you with them?

S: About 11 years or so. 11 years and a half. So I took sick, because I didn't have no medical privileges, you know. All I got was aspirins and pain killers from them, you know. I couldn't get no physical examinations every year as I should have.

G: Why was that?

S: 'Cause on account they cut me off of this Medicare, because I was working off the reserve. They thought they could pin something on me.

L: And living off the reserve too, I guess.

S: Yeah, and working for the federal government.

G: They were trying to do that to other Indian people too, eh?

S: Well, they did. And some of them likely paid it. Seventy-two dollars wasn't too bad to carry on their job, you know. They were threatened. If they didn't pay, they'd lose their jobs. So they must have paid. I don't know - I'm not sure about that. But I heard rumors that some of them had paid. Maybe that's where they are circulating these letters to
everybody.

G: Did any of the Indian people there try to get together to stop that then?

S: No, at that time nobody knew.

G: They weren't telling each other whether they paid or not, eh?

S: No, well they kept it to themselves. But when it came to me, well, that's when it sprung up.

G: Yeah. How did it happen?

S: Well, when it got to me, I said I wouldn't pay it. I'm not going to pay it.

G: Who came to you? Did they send you a letter first?

S: They sent me a letter, yeah.

G: Then what did you write back?

S: I didn't write back. (laughter)

G: You let them come to you.

S: I was so stone-headed, you know. (laughter)

G: Well, what was the next step they took?

S: They threatened me to lose my job if I didn't pay it.

G: Do you remember who did that? Did they write you a letter?

S: Well, I couldn't recall who it was. I couldn't care less who it was. But I'd been threatened: if I didn't pay I was going to lose my job. "It's okay, it's okay if I lose my job over that," I said. "I honor my treaties," I said. "If I paid, I'm not honoring my treaties - if I pay them for my hospitalization."

G: Do you know, do you remember exactly what it says in the treaty about that?

S: Not really. But Dad and other people, and they said they knew treaties with the Queen. The Queen offered so much like the military and stuff like that, you know. So we honour that, you know.

G: That was the Medicine Chest, eh?

S: Medicine Chest, yeah. So when Dad took sick, I used to go and visit him in the hospital. Oh, he was sitting up in bed, you know, when I went to visit him that day. So I went back to town and played pool. And in the meantime, when the wife visited the hospital, and informed the pool room, "Your dad is
pretty sick," she said. And I couldn't believe it. So I went to Dad at the hospital and visited him, and he asked me, he says, "I'm not getting up," he says. "I may last for quite a number of years yet. But I want to know something," he says. And I asked him, "What is it?" He said, "Are you gonna carry on? I think I'm pretty old now," he says. "I've been fighting this case all this time. You know about it," he said.

G: What case was he fighting?

S: Medicine Chest.

G: Oh, he was fighting that too, was he? He never paid?

S: No, but he was living on the reserve. He knew people working off the reserve had been threatened, you know. And, "What are you going to do about this?" he said. So I couldn't speak at all - so it was like somebody held me in the throat there for a while. And it was a big thing to promise, for a man that fought this case for 29 years, and said he was pretty sick, and thought he was unable to carry on. So he asked me what I was gonna do. So when it came to - I sat there for a moment, and when I was able to speak, and I said, "Dad, you ask me if I will carry on," I said. "I'll carry on." So I did. So it lasted from 1961, September 1961, September of that year I was cut off.

G: Well, did they write you a letter about that?

S: Medicine chest.

G: You just wrote a letter, did you?

S: No, they just didn't issue us Medicine Chest. Everybody got theirs. My wife and I didn't get ours.

G: They went to the people who were living on the reserve, eh?

S: We came to the Department of Indian Affairs - "Why is it we didn't get ours?" "Well," he says, "You're capable of looking after yourselves, and you're capable of paying them." But the farm inspector was Ed Jarvis at the time, he was the man going around and saying who was capable and who wasn't capable, you know. I was working off the reserve already at that time. He was the one who said that I was capable of looking after myself. I did, but I wasn't capable of paying the Medicine Chest. (laughter)

G: Well, you shouldn't have to pay anyway.

S: No.

G: Yeah, that's the point.

S: Whether I was capable or not, as I said, I could be a millionaire, and they should still honour my Medicine Chest.
G: Yeah, so you said the summons you were talking about last night was kind of a joke, eh?

S: Well, in the headlines of the – well, under Her Majesty The Queen, you have to appear in court. So that was the one we made treaties with, you know. (laughter)

G: It's like the Queen can't keep things too straight, you know.

S: The White man saying 'forked tongue'.

G: The white man says what?

S: Forked tongue.

G: Oh yeah.

L: Forked tongue. Speaks with two tongues. (laughter)

G: So, how long after that was it that you had to go to court?

S: Well, they kept it up and kept it up, and – it lasted about three years, I think. Finally, they figured Saskatchewan Indians wanted to make headlines, and they came up to me and asked me if they could fight this case for me. So they did, and that's how this plaque from them. That was last fall, or maybe it was August.

G: What happened, did anyone get sick during that time? In your family? Did you have to go to the doctor? Did they charge you for it?

S: Well, we weren't in the hospital, but we didn't pay. Somebody paid. (laughter)

G: Did they send you the bills?

S: They used to send me bills, yeah. They wanted the time I spent in the hospital.

G: What did you do with the bills?

S: That's what I said. I lost track of them. (laughter)

G: They just got so old that they fell apart, eh?

S: I didn't care too much about them anyway. They could've kept on sending them to this day. I wouldn't honor them anyway. I wouldn't pay.

G: So did they say they were going to go through a collection agency to get the money or something like that?

S: Well, they could've done that, but I guess they didn't. They know better, not to do them things.
G: But at the same time they were doing that with other people, eh?

S: Likely, yeah.

G: So what happened next? After that you went to court?

S: Well, then they kept going to court. All I said was, "Plead not guilty."

G: Did you have a lawyer?

S: No. Finally I did have a lawyer through the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians.

L: How many times did you go to court?

S: Oh, I would say about six or eight times. So finally the ruling came down from J.M. Policha — said it was — he read the treaties, you know.

G: He read that before he decided, eh?

S: And decided I wasn't, I was not guilty about that charge.

G: And so after that, they couldn't do it to anybody else, eh?

S: No.

G: Yeah, it's like a precedent, eh? So now, it's because of that that you got that thing from FSI.

S: This plaque here. Everybody joined the Medicine Chest — privileges now. They can work off the reserve and still have this Medicine Chest. They don't have to pay now.

G: Do you think that's why you got that medal, too? The Centennial Medal?

S: No, I don't think so, maybe. Could have something to do with that, too. But I never bothered to ask them questions from the medal you know, how I got it, why I got it. I know it came from the federal government, through the Centennial year, 1967. The plaque was presented to me on account of the Medicine Chest.


S: Yes. (long pause)

S: I'm just a common man. I'm not standing higher than anybody else.

G: Well, no, you were living up to the treaty.

S: If I'm asked, I tell it, but I don't go around and say, "I done this. I done this for myself. I done this for you." I'm
not that type of man, you know.

G: Well, you promised your father, too. That's pretty important, eh?

S: Well, on his deathbed, you know, promised Dad, and I gave him that promise, too, you know.

L: Yeah, the old man's gonna rest in peace.

G: That's right. Yeah. And so can a lot of other people, eh?

S: Yes.

G: Well, Alphonse, can you think of any more questions that we could ask Andrew about?

L: Ah, tell Don about the time you shot yourself. Did he ever tell you about the time he shot himself?

G: No.

S: I was living on the reserve at the time, you know. I was farming, you know. I used to like to hunt with partridge and stuff like that. And I was hunting in the bushes. I knew all the common birds on the reserve, you know. But this certain bird, I never seen it before. I was just hunting this partridge in the bush, you know. Here's this bird on top. So I put a bullet in my .22. "I better shoot this bird. It's rare. I never seen this bird before." Then I thought nobody else has seen - this way I can have the proof. So I kept, and every time I was gonna pull the trigger, the bird would fly off to another branch. Finally I lost track of the bird. So I pulled the trigger and I forgot that I had left it like that. I came to my saddle horse, and there's two strings that - leather strings on the inside of the saddle. So that's where I put the .22, on this trigger you know, and tied it. I don't know what made me done this, but I tied it, and I pulled the gun this way.

G: Oh, oh.

S: And it fired and it hit my leg. Right in there, tore, tore my pants, my socks, took a touch out of my boot there.

G: Didn't hurt your foot too much, eh?

S: No, it just glanced off.

G: You were lucky.

S: Yeah, all sorts of troubles. (laughter)

G: Yeah, you could say you shot a real strange bird that day, eh?

S: Yeah a rare bird. (laughter)
G: And you had the proof, too.

S: I had the proof, too. I got the scar for it too.

(END OF SIDE A)

(END OF INTERVIEW)

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