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ROBERT DALBY

Bob Dalby, a long time resident of La Ronge, has been active in local politics and in the NDP party. He was a friend of Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Life in the north of Saskatchewan in the early fifties.
- CCF programs: why some of them failed.
- Political parties in the north.
- Brady and Norris: comparison of their personalities and styles.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Bob Dalby is a long time resident of La Ronge and has been active in the past on local politics. He knew both men as friends and as political organizers. In this tape he describes the period beginning in the late forties as the transition period away from the natives' traditional nomadic way of life; the errors the government (CCF) made in its programs and its assumptions about the northern people - didn't understand the culture; the lack of leadership among the Cree and Metis - not part of tradition; the insignificance of the local CCF; Malcolm's activity in the party, Jim's inactivity - contrast the men in their approaches.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: I'm speaking to Bob Dalby of La Ronge. Bob, you were

living in La Ronge in the middle forties when Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris arrived to work for the CCF government. Could you tell me a bit about what the environment, the social and economic environment of the native people was at that time?

Bob: Yeah, but one correction there. I wasn't here in the mid-forties when they arrived. They arrived before I did. I came in the very early fifties and Jim and Malcolm were fairly well-established here by that time. I was the stranger coming in. But the economic conditions, of course, was I suppose what you could call the beginning of the transition period from the traditional bushlife, trapping and fishing. Fishing wasn't that important but certainly trapping was. And if you can set a date on something, that was the beginning of the transition from a fairly substantial traditional way of life to what we have now, where the traditional way of life is, you know, almost disappeared completely.

Murray: Would you say that the disruption of the traditional way of life started in the early fifties?

Bob: Yeah, it started manifesting itself at that time and several reasons. It wasn't just economics. It was the growing population for one thing. It was beginning to grow because of health services and things. And I remember very distinctly the old business even with the treaty Indians, the treaty agent would threaten to cut off family allowance if the kids didn't go to school. So parents were compelled to stay in the settlements. At least the mother was compelled to stay in the settlement so that the kids went to school. And I know of several families, people I've known for twenty-five, twenty-eight years, who faced this situation. They could no longer go out to the trapline as a family group. The kids had to stay in school and these people around here, these bush

people around here, have always respected the law. They haven't liked it necessarily, but they've respected it. And so if someone threatened to cut off the family allowance and threatened them with dire punishment, most of them went along with it and believed it, you know.

Murray: Up until that period we're talking about, there weren't that many sort of transfer payments that there are now. It was only, I think, family allowance up until that time. Was that a major cause of the disruption of the traditional way of life? The introduction of welfare, unemployment insurance, those kinds of transfer payments?

Bob: I can't really... I haven't thought of them in that sense. Certainly the family allowance payment, although it wouldn't seem significant by urban standards, white urban standards of the time, it was fairly significant to Indians because it meant the difference between a bag of flour and five pounds of lard. The fish and game presumably they could get for free anyway. I suppose it had more monetary value essentially for the Indian people at that time, certainly than it does now, but certainly more than it did for the average

white people at that time. I think it was fairly significant, the family allowance thing, you know. Especially if there were four or five kids, six kids in the family. It was a substantial cheque each month, you know.

Murray: Right. We read a lot about it in the period of Riel and Dumont that there was a real, a Metis culture and a consciousness of almost a nationhood and a political consciousness. In what sense were the native people in the north in the early fifties, what was their state in those terms?

Bob: They had no political consciousness that I was aware of. I can remember when I first arrived here, I considered myself relatively apolitical. I didn't really become political until I'd lived here for some length of time and saw the inequities and that's what motivated me to becoming political. I didn't need the politics for myself. I saw it, you know, as necessary too for other people. And I think essentially the general run-of-the-mill people up here at the time were apolitical. But I was told a number of times that northerners were traditionally Liberal. Liberal oriented because of the Hudson's Bay Company, because of the Catholic church and possibly because of the Anglican church. I don't really know how much significance there was in this. I would say that the people were essentially apolitical and, by and large, tended to vote for the man rather than for the party. And I think this is still largely true, you know.

Murray: Do you think that they were perhaps apolitical up until that point because there wasn't much disruption. That their traditional way of life had existed up to that point?

Bob: Yeah, it wasn't significant. Politics really wasn't significant to the people of the north at that... The Metis people of the south and the Indian people of the south were certainly more aware of it earlier on because it was all around them. But up here, you see, there was no threat. The white man really wasn't trying to take over the country or take it away from them or control it to any degree. And so the people didn't feel threatened at all and so they presumably didn't build a political consciousness.

Murray: Yeah. I've talked to some native people about the period and asked them whether there was a visible sort of leadership among the native people. Do you recall any leadership until Norris and Brady came?

Bob: No. Again, you know, you could get in the socio-economics of the bush way of life. Chiefs just weren't a part of the hereditary pattern. And so the white man came along and elected the chiefs and gave them a blue coat with brass buttons and things. And my first experience was Adam Henry Charles who was the chief - no, John Morin was the chief when I came. And of course, John was a little bit of a joke to everyone.

Murray: Not very significant.

Bob: Not very significant. And Adam Henry Charles I would say tried to fulfill the role of a chief. I'm not qualifying or questioning his abilities, motives or whatever, but he tried to be the chief and wasn't very successful about it. Because the people really didn't think of the chief being that significant. I think there is more consciousness now, certainly among the younger people, of the necessity of good leadership. In those days, and it isn't that long ago and yet it seems a long time ago suddenly. Things have changed. They didn't... there wasn't the necessity of leadership.

Murray: Things were fairly stable. Is that perhaps why there wasn't a need for leadership? There was no disruption and life went on day by day as it always had?

Bob: You're looking at it pragmatically and the people could always go off into the bush and get a square meal, you know. They didn't have to hang around the settlement. Even with the threat of family allowance cut off and so on. And I know a number of people that didn't conform and didn't come into the settlement and lived quite satisfactorily and happily in the bush. With no way to eventually compel them to conform, you know. But now, it's a very subtle thing, it's happened in the last twenty years, the fact that they've been trapped into conforming whether they like it or not.

Murray: And sticking closer and closer to the communities and institutions that the white man has introduced.

Bob: Yeah, you can almost count on one hand, Murray, the people who live in the bush, period. I don't mean the people who go out for a few weeks trapping every winter but the people who live in the bush as a way of life.

Murray: And stay there.

Bob: And stay there winter and summer and come into the settlement just to get supplies, you know. And it was just white people at one time that you thought of in that situation but now it's the Indian people too. Very few of them really are bush people any more, you know.

Murray: The CCF of course, started some programs in the north in, oh I guess it was 1946-47. Was there an active CCF party or club in La Ronge when you arrived or when did that develop?

Bob: No. Actually, to the best of my knowledge, there never has been a successful - there's been never any continuity in political activity with the CCF or NDP in this area. I think possibly when I ran as candidate in 1971 we had as big an organization and as active an organization as there had ever been. Part of the reason for that was that the white people coming up here tended to be the entrepreneur type and so they were obviously going to be more sympathetic towards the

Liberals or NDP. And partly, the CCF pulled some awful boners as far as the north was concerned, you know.

Murray: Can you give some examples of that?

Bob: From lack of knowledge. One of the serious ones was the fur marketing service. And done with the best of intentions but when I arrived here, I had been with the game branch of Manitoba for a couple of years. I knew the situation there with registered traplines and so on. And it worked fairly well at that time there. And here I found that the trappers had to sell the beaver and muskrats (which is the principal crop) to the Fur Marketing Service in Regina. And they all resented it, without fail, you know, even though perhaps they got a better price. And I think the intent was to give them a better price but for some reason it just didn't work properly. There wasn't any education done certainly.

Murray: It was a top-down program.

Bob: Top-down program as so many of these damn things have been. Co-ops and the whole thing. Superimposed from above, you know. And I think we're only at the point now of having a capacity for things to grow from the bottom up, you know. And I don't say that things are growing from the bottom up, even now. I just say the capacity is possibly here.

Murray: Could be developed, yeah.

Bob: Is being developed. The people are demanding it, which is a great thing. You can't turn back the clock, you know.

Murray: Right. When did you first get to know Jim Brady?

Bob: Let me see. I think I got to know Malcolm before I got to know Jim. And I first remember meeting Malcolm on the street across from the Anglican church where the old Reninburg garage was. And I'd heard of his name. I'd heard of Malcolm Norris and I possibly knew him by sight, you know. The memory is a little bit foggy but the first actual meeting that I positively remember was the time... I was the only person in this area who wore a beard you know. So that set me apart. I was a freak, you know.

Murray: Native people still find them amusing.

Bob: Yeah. But Malcolm was getting gas at the P.A. station at the time and I pulled in there and he came over and introduced himself and we started chatting. My relationship with Malcolm was possibly not as deep as I'd wished it could've been, in retrospect. But we always got along extremely well. He always kidded me and called me a white man and I always called him a bow and arrow or redskin or something like this. So you know, our relationship essentially started off being a relatively light...

Murray: Social kind of thing.

Bob: Social kind of thing. But I was very impressed with him, very impressed. Because, very frankly, up until that time I had not known any essentially Metis people, you know. The few people up here that are classified Metis now, we considered non-treaty Indians at that time. And I don't think any of the

local people considered them any different. You know, they were just people by and large. I certainly didn't think of them as being treaties, non-treaties. But Malcolm was the first person to announce that he was a Metis and proud of it. And I can remember being very impressed with him because he was very eloquent and had obviously done a great deal of thought. You know, he wasn't talking off the top of his head and I was very impressed. And perhaps this sounds chauvinistic but I was very impressed to find that here was a native person being so eloquent and so intelligent, you know. And as I say, my experience was limited and I found it a pleasant surprise to find someone of Malcolm's capacity.

And then I think Jim, I probably met Jim on a November 11. Before we formed the Legion up here, all the veterans used to get together on November 11 and we started having parades - just a loose thing. We'd march down to the Anglican church and have a memorial service and then a little get together afterwards and I think I probably met Jim first at one of the November 11 ones. And he was, physically, quite obviously not a local Indian or native person because of his features. His features were more obviously prairie Indian than bush Indian. And again I was impressed with Jim's diamond-in-the-rough quality you know. Obviously he hadn't had the benefit of a "good background education" and so on. But he was a self-made man. He'd done a hell of a lot of reading and a hell of a lot of sound thinking, you know. And they were both very impressive people. It was very easy to be turned off by them if you were, let's say, antisocialist, you know. But at the time I was apolitical.

Murray: They didn't hide their politics at all.

Bob: They didn't hide their politics at all. They flaunted them. As a matter of fact, I would suspect that both of them, even in looking at my relationship, possibly challenged me. You know. You know, "Who the hell are you?" sort of thing. "Where do you stand?" sort of thing, you know.

Murray: They made everybody take a stand?

Bob: They made everyone take a stand and I can remember having very good arguments, more particularly with Malcolm than with Jim, sitting in the old La Ronge cafe. We'd sit there for hours and Berry used to come in at the same time and we'd argue politics. And at the time, I was being possibly the devil's advocate because I'd always considered myself a half-assed conservative. Never had, you know, been a practising conservative or anything and, as I say, essentially apolitical.

And I hadn't cared for socialism too much because my experience with socialism was essentially the British experiment immediately after the war which wasn't too successful initially. But I didn't have any philosophical stand on socialism and I would suggest - you're taking me by surprise in a lot of this, because I haven't given it a great deal of thought - but I would suggest that possibly Malcolm, as much as anyone, is as responsible as any individual for me becoming a socialist ultimately, you know. And perhaps I don't think I could have ever measured up to Malcolm's degree of commitment to socialism. Because he was committed, you know, absolutely committed. I think it's a tool. I think politics is a tool that you use. And I'm socialistically oriented in attitude so I choose to try and use the socialist tool from time to time. But certainly, they were committed, you know.

Murray: What kinds of things did they talk about? Did they restrict their arguments to what was happening to the north and to the native people or were they broadly interested in world affairs and other political questions?

Bob: I would say the impressive thing about them is that they were broadly interested. They were certainly interested in what was happening to the north and I can remember, I don't remember the specific instances or the individuals, but I've been there when Malcolm has chewed the hell out of some local Indian for not taking a more positive stand politically. And told him that the white man was going to steal the country out from under them if they didn't smarten up. And he was quite forcible about it, you know.

Murray: What was the native reaction to that? If you can recall any individual reactions to his forcefulness.

Bob: A little bit shy and a little bit scared, I think, because he came on pretty strong. I don't think it was the message that was unpalatable; it was something that he was springing on them, in a sense.

Murray: It was the strength of his...

Bob: It was the strength of his conviction, you know.

Murray: Do you think that turned people off or did it eventually sort of wake them up and start a process by which they started thinking?

Bob: I'd like to think that it started them thinking but I don't think it did. I think it scared them more than anything else, essentially. Because it was something that they weren't quite ready for at the time. And the evidence of socialism, CCF socialism, here was really the Fur Marketing Service which I referred to earlier which really wasn't too well accepted by anyone up here. And I was here just... I was here before the... well, the Fish Marketing Service controlled from Regina. And then later when they started introducing co-ops after I had

been here a number of years and again they were superimposed from the top down. And the people weren't jumping up and down with enthusiasm to be cooperative, you know. They weren't naturally cooperative. But a lot of people, and I think the CCF particularly (and even now the NDP to a great extent) because of the peculiar - and I don't mean peculiar funny, I mean specifically peculiar - lifestyle that the people up here evolve socially - you know, an interdependent lifestyle - people assumed that they were ripe for socialism, you know, co-operative. And this isn't the case at all. You know the traditional bush Indian accepts responsibility only for himself and his own family group. And he cooperates with his fellow man because of his pragmatism, you know.

Murray: Right. Only when he has to.

Bob: No, it isn't only when he has to. I mean he does it because it's the logical way to live. But I would say that the reason that the co-op movement up here was no great success, and even now is still not a great success, is because the people aren't naturally socialistically minded. They are fairly elementally cooperatively minded, certainly in a community sense.

Murray: Doesn't follow from a primitive communal sort of thing to a capitalist cooperative venture.

Bob: No, no, there is no connection at all, you know. And I think that the whole thing wasn't sold to them properly in the first place. I've always found that the northern people can accept any kind of idea if you take the time to explain it to them in terms that they can understand, terms that they can relate with. You know, I'm not saying that you have to talk down to them or anything stupid. But when you get a mature person of my age that has had no experience in the city at all, perhaps has never been in Prince Albert in his life, you know, and La Ronge is the big apple, obviously you're not going to be able to communicate in the same terms that you do to somebody in Regina, you know.

Murray: Right. In terms of that kind of communication, was there a difference between Brady and Norris and how they talked to the native people?

Bob: I would think that Malcolm was probably more general in his approach to native people whereas Jim, I think - now I may, you know, this my opinion - I think that Jim would tend to have individual communication. You know, individual friends and things and perhaps carrying on dialogue with them whereas Malcolm I think made it more of a point of trying to talk to everybody that he met, and politicize almost everyone he met. And I think possibly of the two, it may have been something to do with... I always had the feeling that Jim, for all his, you know, self-contained attitude - you know, he was a capable person and he had the strength of his own convictions - I always had the feeling that he was just a little bit hesitant

to push his views. He was a little shy.

Murray: More reserved than Malcolm.

Bob: More reserved. Whereas Malcolm wasn't at all. He would jump in with both feet and feared neither God nor the devil or, you know, the whole thing. Jim was a little more selective in who he talked to. I know that thinking back, Jim and I probably didn't have a serious conversation until I had known him for some time, whereas with Malcolm we took off almost from square one, you know.

Murray: Day one, yeah. That's quite a common description of the two men, I think.

Bob: Yeah.

Murray: Do you recall much about either man in terms of their activity or lack of it in the CCF party itself?

Bob: Not a great deal, Murray, because I wasn't involved at that time. The thing that I do recall more than anything, and again referring to Malcolm, was the fact that he was probably the biggest critic that the CCF had up here. And was certainly a more vocal critic than almost any of the opposition parties at the time.

Murray: Did that endear him to the party?

Bob: No, but it sure as hell made them respect him, you know. I was in Allan Quandt's living room one evening when some minister arrived. I forget who it was now, but it was a CCF minister. And Malcolm and Allan and I were sitting there having a beer and just chatting. And it was in the summertime and I forget who it was. Now it might have been someone like Kramer. No, it was Olie Turnbull, Minister of Co-operatives, and he was visiting La Ronge and walked in and said 'Hi' to everybody and they introduced him to me because I hadn't met him before. And within five minutes Malcolm was going up one side and Allan was going up the other side chewing his ass off, you know. Quite legitimately and knowing exactly what they were talking about, you know. And Turnbull just turned tail and ran out of there, literally. And I think that by and large that the heirarchy of the CCF at the time were a little afraid of Malcolm. Not because he was trying to shoot down the CCF, by any means. He wasn't. He was trying to make it a more vital socialistic party than it was, you know. And there was no way that he could have ever supported anything else. As long as there was a socialist party around, even in name only, Malcolm certainly couldn't be supporting anything else. But he was a thorn in their side. He was their own biggest critic, I think. You know, quite legi... and these people are valuable, they are necessary to keep the bloody party... parties get complacent if their own members aren't criticizing, you know. And I think he was very well respected.

Murray: Was Jim active in the party in the same way that Malcolm was, do you recall?

Bob: No, I don't think he was in the same way. He may have been from time to time. I think he certainly was from time to time during the elections and things like that, but Jim was perhaps more of the philosophical socialist than Malcolm, you know.

Murray: A thinker more than a doer.

Bob: A thinker more than a doer. Any of the discussions I had with Jim were on a philosophical level rather than a pragmatic level of 'we've got to change things and we can change things.' Jim's attitude would be 'it would be nice to change things.' And perhaps he was a little more, it's hard to say, a little more realistic than Malcolm. Malcolm hammered his head against a brick wall, you know.

Murray: A frustrated man.

Bob: Yeah. And perhaps Jim was a little more philosophical and he sort of shrugged his shoulders and thought, well, you know, time isn't now, sort of thing.

Murray: Did Jim spend more time with individual native people in their homes and on the traplines and with them, as part of them, than Malcolm did?

Bob: Oh yeah, I think so, very definitely. I don't know his degree of intimacy with the local people because at that time, you know, I was living across the lake and was only in town occasionally and I wasn't aware of who his close friends were other than the obvious friends in common that we had. So I don't really know how much time he did spend with the local native people but he certainly spent more than Malcolm. And part of this was a pragmatic situation too in that Malcolm's home was really in Prince Albert, in the time that I knew him, and he was here in the summertime working on the Prospectors' Assistance Program.

Murray: Whereas Jim was often here year around.

Bob: Where Jim was here year around. And Jim lived here in the wintertime and you didn't see too much of Malcolm in the wintertime because his job kept him in Prince Albert, you know.

Murray: This may be a hard question to answer, but do you see some or any permanent legacy of the two men in the north today in any way?

Bob: I'm sorry I don't, Murray. I wish I could say that they'd laid cornerstones and so on and so on. I don't see any at all. In my own case, as I say, again Malcolm particularly, more so than Jim, perhaps helped steering me in a direction, but that's a personal business. I would suspect that there,

one of those sad things that their impact was, and I think there certainly was an impact, you know. I think there certainly was but I'm afraid that hardly anybody would recognize it now. And except for a handful of native people, you wouldn't find too many people that even remembered them now. Jim would be more remembered because of the tragedy of his disappearance, you know, and that tends to be perpetuated in folk tale and so on. But Malcolm, I would suspect, just disappeared and ceased to exist for most of them, you know.

Murray: They were ahead of their time in terms of leadership of their own people, were they?

Bob: Oh, very much so. You see, the sad thing is that it's too bad they haven't been here.

Murray: Now?

Bob: In these last five years. Because they could've been really a strong force, you know. And their calibre of people were needed in this last five years. And we really haven't had too many individuals that have come to the... there is a few that are beginning to come up now but there was really, essentially, nobody in 1971. And if Malcolm and Jim had been here, they'd have been very much a force for change, you know. Regrettable.

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INDEX

INDEX TERM	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
CHIEFS AND CHIEFTAINSHIP				
-respect for	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	4
CHILDREN				
-family allowance	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	3
FUR TRADE				
-modern	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	5,6
METIS				
-national identity, development of	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	3
POLITICAL PARTIES				
-CCF/NDP	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	5,9,10,11
POLITICAL PARTIES				
-Liberal	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	3
SETTLEMENT PATTERNS				
-influence of schools on	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	2,3
SOCIAL ORGANIZATION				
-communalism	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	9
TRADE				
-cooperatives	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	6
TRADE				
-marketing boards	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	5,6,9

TRAPPING				
-as livelihood	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	5

PROPER NAME INDEX

PROPER NAME	IH NUMBER	DOC NAME	DISC #	PAGE #
BRADY, JIM	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	7,10-13
LA RONGE, SASK.	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	2-7,11
NORRIS, MALCOLM	IH-364	BOB DALBY	75	6-8,10-13