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JANET FIETZ:

Mrs. Fietz is a Metis woman who lives in La Ronge. She has been active as a spokeswoman for the native peoples of the area.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Conditions in La Ronge area in the 1930s and 1940s.
- First meetings of the Metis Association organized by Jim Brady. His aims for the group.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

Janet Fietz is a Metis woman of La Ronge who has been active in past years as a spokeswoman for the natives of La Ronge. She attended the first Metis Assoc. meeting held by Jim Brady in La Ronge in the late fifties. In this interview she talks mainly about the conditions of native people at the time of the CCF coming to power - how they earned a living, what the communities were like, etc. She describes Jim Brady and his activities aimed at organizing a Metis Assoc. Tells how he influenced the people to have pride in themselves - they saw him as one of them, one of the Metis people. She did not know

Norris well.

INTERVIEW:

Murray: Janet, you were in northern Saskatchewan at the time Brady and Norris came from Alberta. They came in the middle forties, about 1946 and 1947. Could you tell me about the conditions of native people in the north? For example, now we see communities that are pretty much broken up, native people don't seem to be together in the communities. What were the communities like in the north back in those days? Were they the same?

Janet: What do you mean, living together in the reserves and all this or...?

Murray: Well, I know we have talked before about how now native people don't seem to help each other so much, and they don't have a sense of a community - it's just a place where people live. Did people have more of a sense of a community back in the forties?

Janet: Yes, they did. It's just lately this has been going on, ever since we have been told that some Metis can live in the reserves, but before, anyone could live in the reserve without anyone saying anything. But nowadays they really look at you to see if you are Metis or white, and you can't, you know, kind of live in the reserve. In a way, to speak about it, you can't live in the reserve, but in another way, you can live in the reserve and nobody will say nothing. But I think it's just special people that can live in the reserve. For what reason I don't know. But I see a lot of things going on in the reserve that are not supposed to be going on, in the sense that we are being told we can't live in the reserve. But I see it different. Lots of people live in the reserve without anyone kicking about it.

Murray: And years ago that wasn't the case?

Janet: No, it wasn't.

Murray: Do people help each other out in the communities?

Janet: Well, the way I saw it is, if the Metis people killed a moose everybody had a share of it, and if a treaty person killed a moose the Metis people will share it with them.

Murray: What happens now?

Janet: Well, today I can't say whether that's happening now or not. In places, yes. Sucker River I see this still goes on, but here I don't really see it now.

Murray: Was there the problem with alcohol back in 1945 as much as there is today? How did alcohol affect people back in those days? Was it a problem?

Janet: I don't remember it being a problem. It was getting to be a problem at that time because of the tourists coming in and bringing a lot of stuff and because before that I don't think the Indian people, the treaty people, were allowed to drink. I don't know when they were able to go in the bars and stuff. I don't remember. But since they started going in the bars, it is getting worse and worse.

Murray: Before?

Janet: In the 1930s, '40s, I remember the only way you can get liquor is ordering for it. It comes in on the plane and then you had to get it from Waskesiu or something.

Murray: Were there roads up in the north like there are now back in 1945?

Janet: I think the road came in 1944.

Murray: To La Ronge?

Janet: Yes. I think it was in 1944; it was right after the war.

Murray: But it didn't go north of La Ronge until after that?

Janet: Till after. But it came in here because I remember Mr. Pawn(?), building that, which is now Rod and Gun Tourist Cabins with Van Mail(?). They were the two that were setting that up at that time.

Murray: What was the situation in terms of hospitals and nurses and doctors? Were those kinds of things available to native people back then?

Janet: The only time we had a doctor coming in before was treaty time when they used to come in and they would come to the school and look after the kids; that was in the '30s. And we only had this little hospital. La Ronge Hospital they used to call it. It had around five rooms for patients, and then we always had a nurse, and that's all.

Murray: How often would the doctor come in?

Janet: Well, in those days they only came in once a year; that was treaty time they used to bring a doctor along.

Murray: And he would check everybody up when...?

Janet: Oh yes, he'd check up on everybody, yes.

Murray: Do you remember something funny about that?

Janet: Yes, we used to hate that doctor because we knew we would get our teeth pulled.

Murray: Was there a lot of sickness among the native people then? Was there a need for doctors and there were none? What was the situation?

Janet: I don't think there was so much sickness at that time, because we never knew when anyone had cancer or TB or anything. The only time we'd know about it was when the doctor came to check and he'd send a few people out. I don't know how he knew; we never had x-rays at that time.

Murray: So that the nursing station was just for broken legs and cuts and stuff like that?

Janet: Yes, and for women having babies.

Murray: Would you say that - it is hard to judge this I suppose, but - would you say that conditions were better than or worse than they are now for native people if you look at everything?

Janet: Yes. To my way of thinking, this is my thinking, you know, it's not everybody that thinks this way, but I think they were better at that time for the treaty people. There wasn't so much liquor. But nowadays there's so much of that it's disrupting everything - the home life and everything like that. And no one will go out trapping anymore; they want to stay in town close to the community, I guess. And these kind of things. And before there was nothing to stay for.

Murray: That was before the roads came in too I suppose, eh?

Janet: Yes. In those days you had to make your own living. There wasn't so much welfare. Old age pension, family allowance, you know, these were the only things. We had family allowance in the '40s; that's the only free money we got. But now everybody's getting old age pension and family plan, family allowance and if you go in the bush you'll miss all those, you know.

Murray: How did people make a living back in those days, most people?

Janet: In those days we used to, you know, in the wintertime they'd commercial fish and trap, and spring trapping, you know, beaver and muskrat. And I remember when I went to school in the summertime, there was no jobs around, only fire fighting and stuff. And we always left La Ronge to go back to the trap line or someplace else for the old folks to hunt moose and fish. And this is the way we lived.

Murray: And people felt good about that kind of thing?

Janet: Oh yes, they felt good. Well, this the only way you can bring up a family.

Murray: But what about prices for fur and fish? What were

they like in those days?

Janet: I don't quite remember how they were like but I know silver fox was a good price. My mother got six silver fox and she got \$200 each for them. That was in the '30s.

Murray: That was a lot of money then?

Janet: Oh yes, that was, she was real rich. But now today, if you get any fur and you bring it to the store, it's such a low price and the next day you will here it's going up in Regina and you already took your furs somewhere. It seems that the sooner you bring your fur the less you get and the later you bring it in the more you get for it.

Murray: So you should hold on to it?

Janet: Yes, but who wants to hold on to it when you have bills to pay, eh?

Murray: In the early days of Saskatchewan, Metis people in the south, in Batoche and St. Louis and places like that, had almost a nation. They were a whole group of people that lived and they had their own ways and their own culture, and they had a

consciousness of themselves like that. They saw themselves as Metis people and were proud of that. How did native people feel in that way back in 1945?

Janet: I don't remember much about it because they weren't - I never saw them get into groups, like meetings, and talk about things. But it seems that they were looked up to by the treaty people because they were always trying to better themselves. They built their own houses and, you know, they try to really help themselves along. And to think of it now maybe it's because they didn't have treaty money or because the treaties used to get welfare, you know, flour and tea and stuff like this. In the summertime, once in a while, they'd get a free sack of flour. They'd get stuff during treaty time while the Metis person couldn't do that. He had to work for his living; he had to earn the money to buy stuff for himself. And I think this is why the treaty people kind of looked up to the Metis people.

Murray: I know you and I have seen in La Ronge that many native people are afraid to stand up for their rights and, you know, it's hard for them to fight. What was it like back in those days? Were people afraid then to fight for their rights or did they fight for their rights more often?

Janet: I don't think so. I've never seen anyone speak up for themselves, you know, if they knew they weren't getting paid. We didn't know about wages, you know. What do you call that, you get so much an hour or stuff?

Murray: Hourly wage.

Janet: Yeah, that kind of thing. They never kicked. Fire fighters, I think they used to get 25 cents an hour or something, and they never kicked about it. You know, this is what we were getting from the white man so this is what we get. They never thought of saying, "This is real hard work and we want some more money." I have never heard of anything like it. You know, someone standing up for their rights and stuff. And if you worked in a store, you got what you got. You don't ask for a raise or anything. What you got is, you know, that's it.

Murray: Were there any people among the Metis at that time who were considered leaders, that people looked up to, or if you were in trouble or needed help that you would go to?

Janet: I don't remember anything like that. I haven't heard of anyone going to another person to try and get help from them, you know, like tell them maybe what he should do and that.

Murray: So there weren't really any community leaders at that time?

Janet: No, not that I can remember. I don't remember anyone. If you got in trouble, that's your business.

Murray: Today we see government everywhere in the north. No matter where you turn there seems to be government doing something. What was the government activity in 1945, in that time period?

Janet: You mean like wages and work and stuff like that?

Murray: Well, you know, did the government have a lot of employees? Were they involved with the native people, or did you see government people very often in those days?

Janet: Oh no, oh no, we never saw them. Some of us didn't even know who were the government people.

Murray: It was in 1946 and '47 that Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris came into the north. Can you recall the first time you met them or saw them?

Janet: I don't remember. The first time I ever remember seeing any one of them was when they started this Metis Society thing and that's the first time. Well, I've seen them around but I didn't know what they were about so that's the first time that I ever met one of them.

Murray: Do you know what year that was, more or less?

Janet: I don't remember that time, at that time. I have a few letters and stuff that I have; maybe I can check from there.

Murray: Do you think it would have been about 1960 or earlier than that?

Janet: Earlier than that. I think it's in 1950s or something.

Murray: Can you recall how they started to organize the Metis Society?

Janet: I don't remember how they organized it, but one time I was asked by someone to - Jim Brady, they said, was going to have a meeting at his house, and he was trying to get as many Metis together as possible. So I went along and there were about thirteen of us at that meeting, and that was the time we were paying for our memberships.

Murray: Do you remember what they talked about at the meeting?

Janet: They were talking about the low wages they get from fire fighting and other wages they were getting, which were real low. I was getting 75 cents an hour at that time, cleaning cabins for some people.

Murray: What did people think of that kind of talk? Was that the first time that they'd ever heard it or did they agree or...?

Janet: Yeah, they all agreed, the ones that were at the meeting. They all agreed that people should get more for their work than they were getting at that time, because the wages at that time were real low.

Murray: What kinds of things did Brady suggest that people should do to make things better?

Janet: That we were supposed to get together and have a leader and this person, our leader, would bring these up to these people who we were working for and weren't paying us the minimum wage or something. This was what he told us.

Murray: Was Malcolm Norris involved at that time or was it just Jim Brady that you recall?

Janet: Jim Brady was the one that was at this meeting. Malcolm wasn't there at that time.

Murray: Could you tell us a bit about Jim and the kinds of things he said and how he affected people; what people thought of him?

Janet: Well, he told us that we have to get together and in a group like, get a leader for ourselves and he would be the spokesman for us in things that we want to get done, like housing. He talked about we should get better housing, maybe have a co-op housing thing, maybe that we would get better homes than we had at that time. And he also said that we were to try and better our living conditions, and also try and get better wages. But, you know, when you're working for somebody you're scared to go and say, "I want better wages than this." They might fire you and hire someone else at the same wages you are getting, because this was done, I'm sure, at that time. If

you said anything about your working conditions or anything, well you were out of a job.

Murray: Did he talk much about co-ops at all? Did he talk about other kinds of co-ops besides housing?

Janet: No, no, not that I remember. He only talked about that housing co-op that time.

Murray: Do you think that Brady had an influence on people? Did they start to organize?

Janet: Yeah, they sure did. They sure did because he pointed out to us we were human beings too, that we can say what we want to and do what we want to and try and talk about things rather than taking what's handed out to us. There's better things for us, and this is what he taught us. There was better ways of making a living and we can get better homes if we go to work and really talk about it and go to people that we know, white people, that will help us. Because there's lots of white people that started helping us and telling us what could be done and what should be done and this way we found out that there was a better life for us.

Murray: So, Brady didn't say that it was just native people that should get together, but all white and native who thought the same way?

Janet: Yes.

Murray: Do you remember anything about when the first CCF club or party was started in La Ronge and were you involved in that or was Brady involved in it at all?

Janet: I don't remember who was involved in it. I'm sure he was in it in some way, but I remember very well when the CCF got here because there were fights, you know. People would call you CCF, you know, you are no good, but...

Murray: It was a bad word then, eh?

Janet: Yeah, a real bad word. Because the only people I remember way back when they had elections were Liberal. Liberal all over, Liberal. If you aren't a Liberal you were a skunk or something.

Murray: So you had to be a Liberal to get any help or anything, eh?

Janet: Oh yes. They were known to vote for somebody else, you know, nobody likes you.

Murray: That changed after 1944 then, eh?

Janet: Yes, yes, it changed.

Murray: Were there many native people in the CCF or was it mostly white people?

Janet: Mostly Metis and white people, I guess, because I don't remember when the treaty started voting. It was not very long ago that they started voting. But the way I see, the treaties always seem to me to be voting for a Liberal, because Liberals are in Ottawa and it's Ottawa that looks after the treaty. So if you don't vote Liberal you're not going to get nothing from...(laughs)

Murray: How did Jim Brady try and get people to organize? Did he talk to them in their homes? Did he call meetings? What kinds of things did he do to encourage people?

Janet: He went visiting. He visited people, and if anyone goes and visits you that means they like you. And if they don't visit you they don't like you. So this is how come lots of people liked him. He visited them and he sat in the tents or at the campfires and talked to people like this. So people knew he was trying to do something. And doesn't come once in a while and just go through the place and go through town, or land for a few hours and take off again. He lived with us and he talked to us and we learned...

Murray: He was part of...

Janet: Yes, he was part, he was one of us. So we...

Murray: Do you remember much about Malcolm Norris and...

Janet: I don't remember very much about him but I heard about him through a friend of mine. He went to a, I think this was the first time they held the trappers' convention or something. And he was in Prince Albert at that time. He had a heart attack or something and he was rolled around in a wheelchair and he was taken to this meeting. And this friend of mine that went to this meeting said, "He really gave us a good talking to." He said, "You people wake up. Wake up, you Metis people. If you don't wake up you'll never get anywhere. You have to wake up and try and prove yourselves. Speak up for yourselves. If you don't do this you'll never get nowhere. People have been talking to you, telling you, 'do this, do that.' It's about time you started doing something on your own, rather than being told what to do."

Murray: What did Metis people think of that - that kind of speech?

Janet: They really were upset about it. But now, I think now they understand why they were being talked to like that, because at that time no one seemed to be waking up and trying to do something. But since then it has been different.

Murray: So people are now doing what Brady and Norris

told them to do years ago?

Janet: Yes, yes, they are trying to better themselves now. There's quite a lot of people now that are trying to get homes for themselves, trying to buy homes and trying to move into a better house and all this.

Murray: Why do you think back then that people didn't fight for their rights and didn't do what Brady and Norris tried to get them to do?

Janet: Well, you know, the white man has been ruling all of Canada for how many years now? Back then the Metis and the treaties were told, "Do this, do this, and do that." So it will take us quite a while for us to get up and do things by ourselves. Because in those days you were told to do things and you did them, rather than asking for things, you know. In those days they gave you something and that's what you get. You wouldn't ask for more.

Murray: No questions asked.

Janet: No, no questions asked. You were given something, you take that and no more.

Murray: How long did the Metis Society - did it keep growing in La Ronge and in the north? Do you recall?

Janet: Yes it was growing, growing. And they have committees all over the north now. And then when we go to Batoche, these directors or the chairperson comes to that meeting.

Murray: How would you compare the Metis Society then and now? Do you think the leadership is as good now as it was with Brady and Norris, or the same?

Janet: I think it's getting better now. People are getting to know now they can talk about things they need, where they live, you know. Before they didn't speak up for their groups, but now they are speaking up for their groups. I think it's getting better. They are getting to understand what it's all about. We won't understand everything all at once. It will take us quite a few years to get to understand what it's all about.

Murray: Do you think maybe that Brady and Norris were ahead of their time in 1945?

Janet: In a way, yes. And in a way I think it's about time somebody told us we were somebodies too rather than nobodies. Because the way I see it is, we don't belong to the treaty people, we don't belong to the white. We are just - I call myself a nothing.

Murray: People weren't proud then?

Janet: Well, I suppose they were, but in ways. You're proud to be a Metis, I guess, the real Metis. But I'm not a real Metis. I'm married to a Metis, that's why I'm Metis. I was treaty before, and I'm proud to be a treaty, real proud. You know, some people are scared to tell they're treaties, but I'm not. But I married a Metis so I'm called a Metis, but that doesn't make any difference to me. I'm a treaty. I was a treaty so I'm a treaty.

Murray: What kinds of things did the CCF government do? You know, when they were elected in 1944? Did they, were they seen by the Metis people as a good government?

Janet: I can't say. I don't remember what they thought or what they said about it. I didn't really follow these things. At that time I wasn't too interested as I am now. Getting to know quite a few things.

Murray: So you first got involved when the Metis Association got started by the men?

Janet: Yes. And I've been with it till today.

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