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Lael Morgan

Corey Flintoff, interviewer

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Lael Morgan said he was the most awful person to work for. You always felt like you weren't doing enough. He never said thank you. Because he gave so much of himself you never felt like you were doing a good enough job. It wasn't until he died that she realized that she was incredibly fond of him, too.

Corey Flintoff said [that was] Lael Morgan talking about artist, publisher and Native rights advocate, Howard Rock. Morgan worked for Rock on the Tundra times, the newspaper he founded to serve as a forum for Native leadership during the struggle for land claims. In November Epicenter Press in Fairbanks will bring out her biography, *Art and Eskimo power: the life and times of Howard Rock*. It's a story that has taken her a decade to write and a job that she inherited not altogether eagerly. Morgan said he had been asked by the Association of American Indian Affairs to write his biography. He started and written a series of charming vignettes about his childhood which were published in the paper. He got sick and tired and asked her to help him with the biography, but he didn't give her any information. Before he died he assumed she would take over the project. She knew he had had a wife, but she didn't know her name. She knew he lived in Seattle, but had no idea what had happened to him. She discovered that he had been very successful in Seattle as an artist and then he had had too much wine, women and song. He'd gone downhill and really made a mess of his life. He came back to Alaska and thought he'd go out on the ice and commit suicide just about the time Edward Teller decided to do a little atomic test out there and try the reactions of Eskimo people to fallout. Howard was the only man in his village to read and write well enough to write those long letters to the Secretary of the Interior and to Edward Teller. He didn't have time to go out and commit suicide and that's when he walked into the Alaska political scene which was the only way she knew him. There was a prediction before Rock was born by a shaman in the village that he was going to be a great man. Howard was brought up in the church and a lot of the old ways are gone. His uncle was a very famous Eskimo and a powerful one. She said there was some feeling and she often wondered if Howard had a little magic of his own because they would have no money. The post office wouldn't take them on credit to mail an issue of the Tundra Times. He never seemed to worry and money always came through the door and something happened. It always worked out no matter how impossible it was, something they faced, it always just kind of worked out. She thought there was some magic there, just kind of fate.

Corey Flintoff asked where Howard Rock came from and what was his background? Morgan said he came from a traditional village at Pt. Hope. Anthropologists feel it is the longest continuously occupied site in North American. They are a village of very proud whale hunters. It is a very rich village and always were. They had a terrific hunting tradition. Howard didn't like to hunt. He ended up outside getting a white man's education. Corey Flintoff said he was kind of an anomaly in his own culture. Morgan said absolutely. They didn't know what to do with him. From the beginning to the end they didn't know what to do with him. I took them a long time to begin to understand what he was doing with the land claims

movement. She said a man's worth generally was judged by his ability to hunt. He flunked out on that score because he was too soft hearted.

Corey Flintoff asked how things worked once the Tundra times got rolling and it seems to have gained a momentum that carried it on no matter what. What kind of operation was it? Morgan said Howard had a plan. She found this in his correspondence. He knew exactly what he was doing and carried it out from the very beginning. He had his mind made up. The state needed Native leadership and he searched all over. All of a sudden the Native leadership emerged. They needed a clearing house because there's Aleuts and Athabaskans and no one speaking the same language and Eskimos with two different languages. The paper served as their central office and so they could communicate with one another. They kept things ordered so they were all going in the same direction. After the claims passed Congress he said now the work is going to begin and we have our job cut out for us. He stayed on at the paper. There were so many new things. Everybody had lived by subsistence and all of a sudden there was money, board of directors and a whole batch of new things. He began to be recognized which was wonderful. He got sick with cancer and he retired and then decided he couldn't afford to retire. The paper had gotten into financial trouble and he pulled it out of the hole. She remembered the day he was nominated for a prize and he opened the nomination on his desk and said well there it is. He wasn't surprised at all. Although he was quite sick he did enjoy his last years. He loved the paper a lot.

Corey Flintoff said Lael Morgan's biography of Howard Rock will be published in November [1988] by Epicenter Press of Fairbanks.