**1986: Co-chomunn Nis closes**

***Intro (Gill Murray):*** *In this extract you’ll hear two short clips taken from oral history interviews with Agnes Rennie and Roy Pedersen. In them they discuss the closure of Co-chomunn Nis, the community co-op in Ness (on the north most part of the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles). Having been the first co-op set up as part of the community co-op scheme, this was a blow to all concerned, but as you will hear, it also provided some valuable lessons. Agnes, who we hear from first, was a field officer for the community co-ops on the Western Isles. In the second of the two clips we hear from Roy Pedersen. Roy reflects on a conversation he had with Bob Storey, who was head of Social Development at HIDB. Enjoy the clips and thanks for listening.*

**Agnes Rennie:** I think it’s worth mentioning the community co-op in Ness was the first one that was formally established and I’ve often thought – I thought it at the time and I still think it – that it was a blessing and a curse that it was referred to proudly as the first one, but it meant that it was faced with many of the challenges first, and challenges which often there were no answers for. I think the eventual demise of Co-Chomunn Nis actually stemmed from that period. One of the things that Bob Storey and others brought back from Ireland was the template. John Angus and I were talking about this recently. The template involved the setting up of a multifunctional community co-op and therefore there was no choice about whether you followed one income-generating stream or not, you had to have at least three, and sometimes these three were very contrived and in themselves led to demise.

**Roy Pedersen:** There was a big crisis, it was with Co-Chomunn Nis and I remember sitting with Bob at Glasgow airport when we were heading to Barra. I am quite an enthusiastic chap and I was kind of extoling the virtues of the whole thing and Bob was shaking his head: “You know Roy, I think it is going to end badly. I think they are all going to fail except one.” And I said: “Which one?” And he said: “Co-Chomunn Nis”. And I said: “Well Bob, I am going to make a prediction. I think they are all going to succeed except one.” And he said: “Which one is that?” And I said: “Co-Chomunn Nis”. And as it happened Co-Chomunn Nis was the first one -many of them are still running by the way, which is amazing- but it was the first one to fail. Being the first one to have been set up this was a bit of a tragedy, a public relations disaster, because it was set up in a blaze of publicity. I remember Tor Justad, who was the chairman of ACE HI, first chairman of ACE HI -which I will maybe come onto before we finish. He said: “Why did Co-Chomunn Nis fail?” Bob had said: “Co-Chomunn Nis is the only one that fits the Irish model. It’s really multi-functional, it’s got a big population.” And I said: “population doesn’t matter, what matters is economic opportunity. You might have a tiny community that sets up a fish farm, which is highly profitable. Or you might have a big community that sets up lots of businesses which aren’t”. Which was in fact the case of Co-Chomunn Nis, which is a bit of a sorry tale really, but it’s a valuable one.

**Gill:** What did you learn from the closing of Co-Chomunn Nis?

**Roy:** We did learn. I became a bit of a stickler for profitability and we also brought in, as a new management unit within HIDB, to look quite carefully at the co-op and to see what bits of them was profitable and which bits weren’t. We took a hard-nosed approach.