

I am Inupiaq

By Vernita Zilys
Unalakleet

I have been watching with interest the coverage the Tundra Times and other Alaskan newspapers have given to the question of whether or not the tribes of Alaska should press for official tribal status.

I listened and watched on February 8, 1983 when Senator Ted Stevens spoke to the question as he spoke to a joint gathering of the House and Senate in Juneau. In his remarks, he implied that he was "breaking" from his planned speech as a kind of afterthought to say, "By the way, if the Natives of Alaska have any ideas about dealing with the Federal government direct, they should think again." To my way of looking at things, the manner in which he accomplished this "warning" was very adroit:

He made known his stance on the issue, and very clearly and emphatically, indeed. That he chose the middle of his address to the joint legislature for the time, and Juneau's hallowed halls as the place, should have immediately drawn the serious attention of any Native leaders listening.

But by making the statement a "by the by, folks" addition to his speech to the legislators, he succeeded in relegating the importance of this issue to where most non-Natives think it belongs, in the backs of the minds of the people, both Native and non-Native.

It is unclear to me, since I am not privy to the fine points of Senator Stevens' political strategies, whether he made known his views on the issues of Native tribal sovereignty in this oblique fashion to discourage us as a group; or whether he sincerely believes this issue does not deserve address in more direct statements; or whether I am merely paranoid after a lifetime of realizing that my personal concerns just are not as important to non-Natives as they are to me.

It is clear to me, however, that when Senator Stevens cautioned Alaskan Natives not to "get any ideas" about thinking of ourselves as anything but United States citizens and, paramount to that, as citizens of the State of Alaska, he was, in effect, depriving me of my identity as an Inupiaq. In so doing, he made all of the strivings of my ancestors, who brought the seed of ME IN themselves from wherever they came from, futile.

I cannot countenance this.

For years, I lived in the cities. My first memories are of Anchorage, where I was brought by my parents while a baby. One would think this early exposure from infancy to the age of first grade, would have made me confused as to whether I am Inupiaq, or an Alaskan. But I am not confused.

One of my earliest memories is of flying in a 4-engine commercial plane to Unalakleet. But other memories are of walking the tundra in search of berries and greens with my mother, or my brothers and sisters and cousins and playmates.

A more painful memory is of the first grade in the Lake Otis Elementary School. Our teacher, Miss Darby, has put a record on the phograph, and instructs the little boys to each choose a little girl, to take her hand and we will all skip around the room to the music. I am delighted at the prospect of skipping to the music, it is one of my favorite songs: "Here we go loop-di-loo, here we go loop-di-la . . ." and so I wait, wondering who will come to take my hand. I am the only Native child in the room.

The girls are all bashful, I no less. We all duck our heads, and one by one the little boys scoot to the desk of a little girl, until everyone is paired off. Everyone, that is, except me. Not for the lack of boys — there are three little boys, sitting rather miserable-looking at their desks. None of them looks at me, and the rest of the children are kind of baffled.

It so happened that one little boy at last got up and took my hand, and smiled, and we skipped to the music. But this was to be the first in a long string of reminders to me, from then to now, of the fact that I am "Native" — "they" are not.

Maybe Senator Stevens did not mean for his remarks to serve as yet another reminder. In fact, from their tone, I rather think he hoped they would serve as a declaration to me as a Native, that I am yet not Native enough to set myself apart from the governing body of this state, much less the nation to which that state belongs.

But of all the "reminders" I have had, many of which HAVE been joyful, this one was the most jolting.

Why?

Because it sets alarms ringing in my brain. Because it portends of difficult times

ahead for those of us who do wish to set ourselves apart from non-Natives, not just in western attitudes to us as a people whose eating habits and social mores are different, not just because WE see ourselves as citizens of a time-honored and brave civilization, but because the western peoples have proven time and again that nothing but this kind of recognition from their governments to the governments of people strong enough to insist, will work.

When I attended a conference of so-called "indigenous peoples" from all over the world in Washington, D.C. last October, a panel of lawyers exhorted us to use "the law" against itself — to use the same tactics to save our lands, and to prevent all-out assimilation of our people into the western society.

I said then, and I say it now: "The most basic deprivation we as indigenous peoples have suffered from our contact with western 'civilization' has been our right to our own laws, the laws that ordered the continuing lifestyle of our ancestors.

How can we win as a people, in an alien court?

If we were arguing our rights to the land, if we were fighting the battle to prevent the despoilment of our resources by outside developers, if these issues were brought forth for consideration by our own judges, in our own courts, there would be no question but that our rights to the land and resources would be considered thoroughly protected. As the saying goes, "When the dog is serving dinner, he does not give himself the bone."

Recognition of the individual tribes of Alaska on the federal level would not guarantee much. But it would be a step in the right direction. I am not so naive as to believe that my grandchildren will have been fully restored their rights, nor that they will enjoy the same confidence in those who govern them (it being certain they will continue to be governed by those who govern in 1983). I do not even dream of a Utopia where the Inupiat will be allowed to live in the old ways if they so desire.

Instead, I console myself with the thought that I am Inupiaq because my mother and father are; and they were so because of my grandparents; and so on. This, at least, cannot be changed. And I look around the village, and I see young people going out for greens, learning how to check and maintain their herring and salmon nets, how to cut fish, hunt oogruk and walrus and seal and moose and caribou, and going after the birds in the spring. As long as we have these resources, there will be people who harvest them, with

(Continued on Page Two)

My Turn continued

(Continued from Page Eight)
or without a Department of Fish & Game.

There is much to admire about the ways of the western world. We have benefitted as a people from medical miracles and warm clothing and equipment with which to pursue the resources our ancestors had to pray to their gods for, and hope the gods were not angry.

But I fear much about the ways of the western world, too. One only has to pick up a newspaper or watch the evening news to see what I am speaking about. There are patterns of violence, political and social and personal. One

of Murphy's Laws says, "Badness comes in waves . . ." and some waves look endless.

I applaud the formulation of the United Tribes of Alaska. That, too, was a step in the right direction. Some Chinese (could have been an ancestor — in the days of the land bridge) said, "The longest journey begins with just one step." Failure is when that step is the only one taken. Press on, UTA!

To Senator Stevens: You have worked for Natives in many ways, not un-noticed by me and many others. But we must agree to disagree on the particular stance you have taken on this most important issue.