

# Rock's paper spurred people to action

by Steven Angasan

Chukchi News and Information Service

NAKNEK — Inupiat Eskimo Howard Rock founded the *Tundra Times* in October 1962, in Fairbanks. Tom Snapp, a local journalist, was hired to help Rock learn the ropes about journalism and running a newspaper.

"In just a little while, he was better than I was on makeup," Snapp said about Rock in a recent award-winning documentary on Rock's life by Susan Andrews called "Portraits of Leadership."

Snapp trained Rock for "one year and a day." He said the makeup, or graphic design, "was very good in that paper" because of Rock's background as an artist.

The *Tundra Times* was the first statewide newspaper in Alaska that addressed Native issues and political concerns. Rock started the paper because Native political figures had urged him to.

Rock thus became a pioneer among Alaska Natives in the field of mass communications, which has been defined as "sending or receiving messages, the art and technology of communicating that is directed at or reaching a large number of people."

Mass media in Alaska, such as television, newspapers and radio, did not choose to direct much positive attention to Alaska Native issues and concerns prior to the *Tundra Times*. Consequently, Rock rose to fill the void.

In earlier days, formal education of Native people beyond the eighth grade took place mostly in boarding schools scattered throughout the state and even in the Lower 48.

Examples of these schools are Mt. Edgecumbe near Sitka, Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka and White Mountain boarding school near Nome, the school that Rock attended.

At that time, mass media in the Native culture did not exist to any large degree. Native history, legends and folklore were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The *Tundra Times*, on the other hand, is a print publication that is precise and has longevity. The message is clear, and the words can be seen by large numbers of people.

Dialogue about Native rights and also about Native claims was changed forever in the 1960s by the presence of the politically interpretive and informative news in the *Tundra Times*.

In the modern era, Alaska Natives have become a much more educated

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and informed group of people, which has led to outspokenness, and Rock led the way.

Rock's editorials were a tool for him to express views that spurred people into action.

"Howard was a master of understatement," said Snapp. "He would write an editorial on real grievous problems of Native people, and he would so understate the cause, the thing, that even the toughest, the strongest opponents would be impressed."

Editorial sections of newspapers are typically filled with interpretive and sometimes passionate pronouncements on issues of the day, and that is where Rock put his literary talents. He helped fight for Native land rights in the 1960s.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed by Congress on Dec. 17, 1971. The following is an example of Rock's influential editorials taken from the *Tundra Times*' special land claims issue at the time:

"Let us recognize the task that will fall on our shoulders. It will test the strength of our leaders as well as the rest of our people.

"We also have proven that we can handle highly complex problems, such as the Alaska Native land claims. We must not do less in the future. We must meet it with confidence and then do more for the good of the people today and of those of tomorrow."

Not only did Alaska Native leaders statewide read the *Tundra Times*, but so did politicians in the federal and

state governments. Consequently, the paper "picked up an enormous amount of power," according to Lael Morgan, Rock's biographer.

After it began publishing in 1962, the *Tundra Times* helped with the formation of the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966 and passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

The *Tundra Times* has its place in Alaska history. Today, it is still the only statewide weekly paper that addresses Alaska Native issues and concerns.

The fact that it is still around today, is a tribute to its founder and the people who believed in Rock's cause.

To say that the *Tundra Times* has changed the dialogue about Alaska Native rights and land claims is purely an understatement.

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