

Remembering Nick Gray; philosopher, visionary

by Marilyn Richards

Nicholas Carrol Gray was the first child ever born in Council City, Alaska, a log cabin town of 300. Gray was born on November 26, 1900, the son of a white gold miner named Dave and an Eskimo named Mary.

"How did they meet?" muses Gray's 78 year old sister, Rose Bronson of Nome. "Why Mother was standing on the riverbank and Poppa was coming upriver, and then they met."

Gray's Eskimo name was Utkiatok. Another sister, Nora died in childbirth in the '20's, and a brother, Max, died in an industrial accident the same decade. His younger brother Clinton Gray, Sr. is now retired at 68 and living in Florida after working with the Nome Nugget, the Anchorage Times, the Anchorage News and the Frontiersman.

"We lived in a house, ate regular meals and went to school, that's how we lived," says Rose. "Nick wasn't a mischievous boy. He got a long good with Mother and Poppa. he was brilliant. He had a good mind."

Council City's population more than doubled by the time Nick was in junior high, but local education stopped at the eighth grade. Nick first went to Chemawa Indian School in Oregon, but later transferred and went to and graduated from high school in Paso Robles, California. Among his classmate were his brother Max, Ben Cross, and the late Frank Degan of Unalakleet.

Nick joined the army after World War I and was stationed in California. After his discharge, he worked as a bell hop at the old St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. Later he fished in Ketchikan and Juneau.

"They called him the Bow Tie Kid," says Clinton. "one time there was a fight in the Ketchikan cannery with the Filipinos. When it was over Nick was stripped to the waist, but he was still wearing his bow tie!"

Later Nick had worked for a Nome mining company. Here also married an Eskimo woman and fathered 3 children. The family moved to White Mountain and then Nome. Nick's oldest son and one of Rose's sons were in a gas explosion in Nome. Both youngsters were severely burned and Nick's son died at the Tacoma Indian Hospital and Rose's at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

"Things are a little nebulous. Nick moved around but he enjoyed life to the fullest," says Clinton. Nick was later divorced. Surviving son Max Gray still lives in Nome and only daughter Irene Gray Penwell lives in Portland, Oregon.

After World War II Nick worked in logging camps in Washington and Oregon. He also worked in construction and as a house painter. He even picked fruit as a migrant worker. After returning to Alaska, he worked again in construction in Nome and Dutch Harbor, and at White Alice sites, at Barter Island, Cape Romanof and elsewhere. "In Fairbanks he even worked at a music store selling pianos," says Clinton. "He was a convincing talker."

During his winters in Fairbanks, Gray met Ralph Perdue an Athabaskan living in the city since 1945. Perdue was long active in Fairbanks civic and Native political affairs, and was the first Native elected to the Fairbanks school board. He also re-organized and re-established the Tanana Chiefs Conference, whose last recorded meeting was back in 1913,

and served 6 years as its president in the fifties & sixties. Both Gray and Perdue were instrumental in founding the Fairbanks Native Association.

"In those early years it wasn't easy. At that time there was a lot of prejudice (against Natives) or there were a lot of people who were," says Perdue! "Nick told me it was that way in Nome and Anchorage, too." They organized FNA because of the need for rural Natives to learn "coping skills" in Fairbanks and Anchorage.

Most of the Native high school children were also sent Outside to schools in Oregon and Oklahoma. "We brought the children back to Alaska to educate them at home."

Perdue remembers raising funds for FNA "We auctioned off cars and beadwork, and a hand carved Tlingit-Haida coffee

table." "I put on the first potlatch in town during the dog races to help keep TCC and FNA going," says Perdue. "There were times Nick and I disagreed but that's normal. It was good to hear both sides and then to make a decision."

Besides education and jobs, FNA was also organized as part of the Native land claims effort. "Nick Gray did it for nothing. Another one who did the same was Don Wright," says Perdue who also donated his own money to FNA, and to help finance travels to organize the Interior villages.

"We were all anti-Bureau of Indian Affairs. They weren't doing anything," recalls Perdue. "The leadership (today) is not what is is purported to be," he adds. "I don't think Nick would be happy today."

In the early sixties, Gray

moved on to Anchorage and helped the Cook Inlet Native Association, CINA, recent 20th anniversary Spirit Days celebration was dedicated to his memory.

"I held him in high regard," says Emil Notti, one of CINA's founders, and now commissioner of the Department of Community and Regional Affairs. "He had a very clear understanding what was happening. He knew what was happening and he had a very clear vision. He was very articulate. He had a lot of concerns and how to get at the concerns, and a way to prepare people for the future."

"He is responsible for a lot of organizations today," says Notti. While at CINA Gray wrote, "The future lies with our young people. A complete educational process is in

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Gray possessed a rich sense of humor

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order. This is not to say that the Native culture should be forgotten, but the Native has moved into the White Man's world. The White Man has moved into the Native world, also. . . . When young people start taking an active part in the organizations and, in some cases, when they start taking over, you can be assured that your association will perpetuate itself."

The interlocking tusk logo was designed by Gray for CINA. It symbolizes strength in unity, the Indian, Eskimo and Aleut. The original hangs above Rose Bronson's refrigerator in Nome. "He was very artistic. And he taught my son to draw," says Bronson.

While living in Anchorage, Gray discovered he had leukemia. For a year the disease was in remission. Gray still dreamed of Native unity. "He told me that 'If we're going to raid the U.S. Treasury, we gotta get organized,'" recalls Clinton Gray, Sr.

"He helped us get organized," says Tony Lewis, another early founder of the Kuskokwim Valley Native Association. "One day he and Fred Notti (Emil's brother) came over and gave us a pep talk. The were very

encouraging."

Lewis, a 71 year old Bethel resident, says "Gray was a quiet type of person. He was small, maybe 5 feet 6. But when he had a point to bring out he'd bring it out."

"He said he was half Jew and half Eskimo, so he introduced himself to us as a Jewskimo," laughs Lewis.

"I couldn't believe how intelligent he was," says Gray's niece Nancy Gray Olsen. Olsen, was a teen-ager who graduated from Anchorage's West High in the sixties. She now has her own business and also works for the Lake and Peninsula School District.

Emil Notti unveiled an acrylic portrait of Gray by Moses Wassillie at the Atwood Center

"I had tears in my eyes," says Olsen. "I cried. The painting is excellent." Olsen also remembers when Gray helped her on an alcoholism paper she did in high school.

Besides lecturing, traveling and helping organize the Fairbanks Native Association, the Cook Inlet Native Association and the Kuskokwim Valley Native Association, Gray also helped with the Copper River Native Association.

His legacy, however remains

in what he envisioned: The first meeting of the Alaska Federation of Natives, included many members of associations Gray helped create.

On his deathbed he wrote, "It is gratifying to observe the awakening of our people to the

necessity of cooperative effort by forming associations, brotherhoods, . . . to protect our heritage. . . .

"Our hereditary claims can hardly be denied, since they extend far into the dim pages of history, for outdating the begin-

ning of most currently established nations. . . . The next logical step for these separate and far flung groups is affiliation and then eventual amalgamation into a harmonious whole department dedicated to achieve the most good for all."