

# RACISM STIRS IN KOTZEBUE

## Remark May Have Been Blown Out of Proportion

By LAEL MORGAN

"It's not a true statement," Bobby Schaeffer, Kotzebue's Eskimo mayor said firmly. "That isn't what was said."

The statement in question was one of many making the rounds as word spread among Caucasians in the bush that Kotzebue is a good place to avoid these days.

"At least one white businessman is carrying a gun in his car," reported a bush traveler recently to teachers in an outlying village. (He admittedly had the story second-hand.) "They say the whites are going to be treated there 'just like the Niggers in Alabama.' Said it right in a public meeting!"

This is the statement that Bobby Schaeffer denies was ever made.

There's no denying, however, that the subject of inter-racial relations is a tender one in Schaeffer's area — perhaps more so than any other place in the state. There is considerable unrest among both Natives and whites and the local newspaper reflects it.

Recently Kotzebue had an election upset that gave the town its first Native mayor and put

three progressive, young Eskimos on the city council.

"The whites had always been in control," Schaeffer observed. "They had the formal education and the business training. In the past it's just that Native people never got involved in any political game. They just wanted to hunt and fish.

"Well, four of us younger people wanted to try and get something up. We didn't talk to anybody. Didn't campaign. Just ran . . ."

They got the majority vote, but the old guard protested, threw out the ballot and held a second election.

"This time we got an even bigger majority," Schaeffer smiled.

The parallel between Kotzebue and Alabama came up when the Natives protested issuance of a liquor license to a white-owned club.

"We felt they (the white club owners) did not have a straight record," Schaeffer explained. "And it was mentioned that, with the Native Land Claims settlement, we're going to have to invest our money in order to make it work if a share is going to be worth anything in 20 years. The Native and village corporations are going to need businesses to get into . . ."

"The white people got up

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and raised hell. Said there was no reason to be prejudiced."

It was then Schaeffer's brother (John, executive director of the Northwest Alaska Native Assn.) who mentioned the relationship of whites to negroes in the South. The quote has been bent out of shape with retelling, Mayor Schaeffer maintains. It wasn't as extreme as reported.

The problem as Bobby Schaeffer sees it, goes back to the "land steal" 15 years ago.

"They posted everything. Did it legal. Auctioned all the lots in Kotzebue for from \$14 to \$40. The white people knew the value of land. No Natives got lots. And many of the whites left with deeds in their hands. You know, federal workers; BIA . . . Now they're in Washington, D. C. . . . outside all over. Most white people just take money out of town."

Schaeffer, 23, was born and raised in Kotzebue with seven brothers and two sisters. His dad is a hunter and his mother has worked part-time as school

cook.

"A lot of the time we were scraping to get milk for the kids but it was beautiful," he recalls.

On graduation from Copper Valley High School, Schaeffer went to college in Colorado. It was his first trip stateside and he stayed only a semester.

"It felt good to be home. Colorado country is beautiful but there are no Eskimos . . ."

He transferred to the University of Alaska but didn't find anything he wanted to study. So, about two and a half years ago, he returned to Kotzebue and took a job with Alaska Airlines. Later he heard there was an opening with the Rural Alaska Community Action Program working for social, economic and recreational improvements. Schaeffer became regional director.

"It was my first venture in the political game."

His brother, John, meanwhile became the first president of the Northwest Alaska Native Assn. (NANA) and the two men began to work together.

"The reason I got so close to NANA is that I realized what would happen once the land claims were settled. We're going to have to take over our own social services, health, education . . .

"Like the Senate testimony on the Sea Mammal legislation. A lot of Senators said, 'We've already given them 40 million acres and a billion dollars. What more do they want?' They gave us something and they think we can take care of ourselves."

Schaeffer assesses the settle-

ment administration set-up as "a political play.

"They divided us into regions with no central organization because they didn't want the minority to have a lot of power. But we can turn the tide in any election in Alaska."

Schaeffer's region was the first to move in planning for the claims payoff. Before the bill passed Congress, they negotiated a \$10,000 interest free loan from the Episcopal Church. Using this for seed, they won \$40,000 to do a study for the State Division of Family and Child Services.

State Operated Schools already had the Kobuk Valley down for a \$2.5 million regional high school and the Natives contracted with them to provide \$30,000 for a priority study on educational needs of all the villages of their area.

As soon as the land claims bill passed, they were ready to go directly to their people and find out how they wanted the money spent. In addition, of course, they surveyed for the state agencies and are now planning to coordinate their efforts.

"Out top priority is education," Schaeffer said. "We want a regional high school board instead of State Operated Schools, BIA, Friends Church, etc; all with different programs."

Under the land claims settlement the Kotzebue region will receive something over two and a half million acres and eight or nine percent of the cash. There are about 5,000 Eskimos in the region.

And as for the future of Eskimo power . . .

"It's going to bubble up way more," Schaeffer predicts. "The Native people are finally going to see the light. We want to see that what happened to us in the past doesn't happen again.

"The blacks had hundreds of years to get in the pace. We got caught, bang, in the future."

And the whites . . .

"We've got to work with them. They've got to work with us! They've always had the knowledge of city government and business. We've never had. They've taken over and think they're doing good. But they've had no concept of the Native as a whole. They've never taken into consideration that we've got a stake, too . . .

"We're 80 per cent Native in Kotzebue and the majority rules, you know."