

# Rock used a typewriter, not a war club

by Steve Werle

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**NOATAK** — For 10,000 years, Alaska Natives had settled their territorial conflicts on the field of battle, a method that worked until the coming of the white man.

Traditionally, the survival of Native bands depended on strong leadership. Early Native leaders, such as Tlingit Chief Katlian, led on the field of battle, while modern leaders, such as Inupiat Eskimo Howard Rock, led in the battlefield of politics.

When Russian fur hunters came to Alaska in the mid-1700s, they needed land for their forts and trading posts. European law granted them the right to take what they wanted with no regard for Native people. Chief Katlian, a Tlingit warrior in Southeast Alaska, refused to yield to the greater might of the Russians.

Katlian fought his enemies face-to-face, as his ancestors had done. Chief Katlian was one of the last Alaska Native warriors to defend his land on the traditional field of battle. As it happened, the Russian invaders were too powerful and too many. Chief Katlian was routed.

For more than 150 years, foreign invaders, first Russians and then Americans, exploited the wealth of Alaska with little regard for its Native people, who were decimated by disease, alcohol and other things introduced by the white invaders. Scattered Native populations had no power over Outside people who made the laws to fit their own needs.

Unlike Chief Katlian, Inupiat Eskimo Howard Rock was at first a reluctant leader. He had left Point Hope, his Native village in Northwest Alaska, at an early age and spent most



*Howard Rock was from Point Hope.*

of his life in the white man's world.

In fact, Rock spent so much of his life away that he had lost the use of his Native language and many fellow villagers barely regarded him as Eskimo.

When Rock returned to Point Hope as a middle-aged man in the early 1960s, the U.S. government was planning a land-grab that could have wiped out his people. The Atomic Energy Commission's scheme, called Project Chariot, planned to detonate an atomic bomb at Cape Thompson near Point Hope. Inupiat survival now depended on making informed decisions and no longer just on hunting and other survival skills of the Far North.

By this time in Alaska history, communication and politics had become more powerful weapons than guns. Although he used a typewriter instead of a war club, Howard Rock was as certainly a warrior as Chief Katlian.

By the early 1960s, scattered groups of Alaska Natives became more

organized about addressing the issue of their aboriginal land rights. Western education and acculturation had afforded young Native leaders the ability to fight in the white man's arena of politics, the law and the media.

The *Tundra Times*, a weekly newspaper started by Howard Rock in 1962, aired Alaska Native issues throughout the state and in Washington, D.C. The *Tundra Times* acted as a unifying force for scattered Native groups. By 1966, the Alaska Federation of Natives consolidated numerous regional groups into a statewide force.

In the 1960s, civil rights issues had become a popular political cause throughout America. Since statehood in 1959, Alaska land titles were being conveyed without regard for Native rights.

When U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall learned of Alaska Natives' situation, he rallied to their defense by implementing a land freeze in Alaska. No more public land would be conveyed until Native claims were settled, Udall ruled.

As a result, all parties concerned wanted a fast settlement to Native land issues. The state of Alaska wanted title to the 103 million acres that the federal government had granted Alaska at statehood.

Oil companies were anxious to develop North Slope petroleum reserves after huge oil deposits were discovered at Prudhoe Bay in 1968.

Environmentalists saw an unprecedented opportunity for wilderness areas to be preserved. The federal government wanted to reduce dependence on foreign oil.

Alaska Natives wanted title to their land as well as compensation for lands already taken by outsiders. A compromise, in the form of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1971.

When ANCSA was signed into law, most Native groups agreed to the terms of the settlement. Only the Arctic Slope Native Association refused to compromise in its claim for the entire North Slope.

The passing of ANCSA was not the final solution to Native land problems. The 1991 amendments to this historic act were drafted to solve some of the original faults, but they were not the ultimate answer.

Alaska Natives continue their battle for land in the 1990s. Today, more than ever, strong leadership is needed. The onslaught by outside interests brought against Natives today are more powerful than the cannons that pounded Chief Katlian.

Only through a strong united front will Natives be able to win the next battle in their continuing war to protect their cultural heritage.

The stakes today are as high as when Chief Katlian fought the Russians. In the balance lies the cultural survival of Alaska Natives, a diverse group of people who were original guardians of this great land.

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