

Success and failures leading to 1991

The following text is a transcript of a speech given to the Statewide Chamber of Commerce on Oct. 2 by Willie Hensley, President of the NANA Development Corp., chairman of the United Bank of Alaska and a director of the NANA Regional Corp. Hensley is a former state legislator and his speech to the Chamber is the first presented to such an organization for 15 years.

In times past, were it not for some luck and perseverance by Alaskans I perhaps may not have been here, except to talk of purely political matters.

But today we will see that the Alaska of 1981 is not the Alaska of 1971. Nor will the Alaska of 1991 be much like 1981.

My charge today is to discuss with you the events that have transpired in the last decade - the successes and failures in the Native community and to look down the road another decade to 1991 to see what may be transpiring.

In December, 1971 President Nixon signed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and brought to a conclusion what may be considered the final chapter in the "Winning of the West."

For the Alaska Native - the Aleut, the Indian and the Eskimo - that Act, in effect, was our Treaty with the Federal Government, despite the fact that we were not always at the bargaining table. It represented a rather remarkable change of policy, for rather than engaging in warfare, on that occasion, the question of title to a vast expanse of North America was negotiated and legislated (politically).

After a century of Americanization, by 1971 the Alaska Native People finally saw clearly the fact that our homeland of 10,000 years, had been divided up among the Federal and State Governments and among the various tribes. In the process of the resolution of this conflict over land and our peoples potential for survival, Alaskans have much to be thankful for. Despite the heat and the emotion, despite the many years of debate, maneuvering, verbal

attacks and political intrigue that pitted Alaskans against each other, we basically handled the conflict in a friendly manner. The Alaska Native people barely lifted a placard in an age when rioting in the streets was rampant.

It was our view that the political system of the United States was flexible and would respond to our quest for justice. In fact, in this room today are individuals who played major roles in the drama. Gov. Walter Hickel and Gov. Bob Egan both deserve a hand for their even-handed effort to resolve the conflict.

In this same vein, I would like to note that your President, Al Parish, perhaps due to his youth (or idiocy) at the time, had the good sense to get the Chamber in Fairbanks to support our request for 40 million acres of land at a time when Alaskan support for the acreage was important.

The truth is, the Chamber of Commerce, on the whole was not terribly excited about the prospects of the Native community being successful in its quest for a settlement.

We in turn, perhaps were not active enough in trying to explain the potential for more Alaskan control of Alaska. We always felt that the settlement would be beneficial to all Alaskans and I believe this fact has been borne out by events.

You all know the basic ingredients of the land settlement: A cash distribution of close to \$1 billion. A land retention of 40 million acres. A corporate vehicle to carry out the provisions of the Act, both villages and regional. And the exclusion of any tribal government structure separate from the State.

The economical consequences of the settlement have been substantial, especially in conjunction with the revenues generated to the state by oil production.

To my knowledge no one has tallied the total assets or revenues or total employment and wages generated by our companies from Southeastern Alaska to the Far North, but it is considerable.

The activities in which we

are now engaged cover the spectrum of business in Alaska: there is not a single economic activity that is not directly or potentially affected by our investment decisions, our management or our politics.

From seafood to the energy field, real estate, construction to communications, mining and transportation, finance and insurance, tourism, the timber industry and surveying, the economic activities of the Native-owned enterprises now involve arenas we once thought were beyond our potential.

Perhaps, the benefits of the Settlement Act could be more aptly characterized by non-economic criteria:

a. Alaskans - instead of being divided, are now required to do business together. Out of the thousands of instances of negotiation, sales, employment, lunches and dinners, comes a better perception of each other, greater understanding, a greater cognizance that in reality we all seek an opportunity to survive, to be understood and to enjoy life in Alaska.

Furthermore, the Settlement Act has afforded our people an opportunity to engage in the creation of the Future Alaska, where we otherwise might have been complete bystanders in the process. We have had to develop skills we never knew we possessed.

Despite the fact that our capitalistic-oriented settlement occurred at a time in history when the free enterprise system was

faltering; i.e. regulations galore, resource scarcity, high interest rates, inflation, labor expectations - our people, virtually bands of hunters and fishermen, have taken the most intricate institution in America, the corporation, and made it work.

Sure, we have had our problem areas, but we have also had one region join the fortune

1000 and several corporations have been profitable for six to seven years running.

We have problems to overcome among our entities, such as the conveyance of our lands and the survival of some village corporations. But, these will require attention and some

(Continued on Page Seven)

Corporations work on different plain than profit makers

(Continued from Page Three)

innovative ideas to overcome. It is important for you to know that our corporations are not typical members of the corporate community.

The nature of our shareholders, low income people, many of whom are having great difficulty in absorbing the pressures of western civilization. Their educational and economic opportunities have been limited. And they are not accustomed to looking at the world in an acquisitive fashion, or to be individually competitive.

Along with the corporate challenges, perhaps the greatest challenge of the land settlement has been the necessity of finding a way to meld the Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut identity, language, values and culture with the Western values and ways of being and acting. And to do that in a way that is both acceptable and understandable to both our shareholders and leadership.

Because of the rapid and vast changes in our Native world, our languages, our traditions, our religions and our law — the disorientation has taken both a mental and a physical toll. We not only must seek to maintain a handle on the economic necessities of our people, we also must foster the continuity of our peoples identity, language, history and tradition.

For we did not agree to this settlement to help oversee the continued deterioration of our basic unity as a people. All human beings must have a sense of continuity and belonging, a sense of obligation and responsibility to their family, relatives and community. For Native people, this is particularly true.

So our charge as corporate leaders goes far beyond the narrow confines of pure business — we have the obligation to help our people find a happy mean in a world that is constantly changing.

This brings me to a subject that is near and dear to the well-being of our people. While much of our time must be spent in the corporate world — the Native leadership also must serve their people in other ways — in politics, in educational policy and in the arena of individual survival.

On that point, I would like to ask your assistance and understanding. Our people have made every effort to accommodate themselves to the new world of technology and capitalism.

But in large part, our people are children of the land and of the sea. The interaction with nature is not just for food. It is a matter of the well-being of

the whole person.

Yet at this stage and for some time to come, our people might continue to eat from the land. There have been elements in the Alaskan com-

munity that seek to deprive Native people of primary access to our traditional diet.

We are willing to try to work out realistic and practical solu-

tions to the plight of "urban anglers" but not to the detriment of small villagers who require fish and game for sustenance.

For our part, we will continue

to make every effort to train our people to use the skills that are required for survival in the future economics of Alaska.