

## Alaska Natives Commission Report~

# The Undoing of a People: The Loss of Self-Reliance

*The following is the sixth part of a series the Tundra Times will be featuring on the Alaska Native Commissions Final Report. Excerpts from the report will appear periodically over the next several months.*

Alaska Natives occupied Alaska's formidable land mass for at least 10,000 years prior to Vitus Bering's arrival in 1749. The reality of Alaska's hostile environment on both land and sea is common knowledge even among America's elementary students.

It is almost rhetorical to point out that in order to survive in the face of raging seas, arctic storms, and oftentimes scarce food supplies, Alaska Natives were capable, independent and strong will. Ethnographers and other scientist traveling to areas of Alaska prior to the onset of significant Western influence in those areas confirm these very attributes among Alaska Natives. In addition, technological inventiveness, physical and mental resilience, and a keen awareness of all the requirements for survival were among the many other noted traits.

This image of an independent, self-reliant people contrast sharply with many images seen today within the Alaska Native community. Without necessarily even knowing that it was happening, Alaska Natives gradually adjusted to the relentless interference of non-Natives and, to a large degree, yielded their choices and decisions to outsiders who appeared to know what should be done and how to do it. The result is that several generations of Alaska Natives have been bound in a relationship of ever-increasing dependency on public service, subsidy and control by others.

The situation did not come about overnight. Rather, the process from which it blossomed took hold and began to accelerate during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Over the next 60 years, Alaska Natives and their cultures would be transformed forever.

The influenza epidemic at the turn of the century was followed by yet another in 1918, tearing the fabric of life even further for Alaska Natives Missions, orphanages and schools proliferated during the first three decades of the 1900's, and Natives' dependence on others to feed, educate and guide them and their children grew proportionally. The trends that tied them to their forbears and to their traditional lifeways were becoming fewer and fewer, even as their families and villages were growing increasingly unhinged due to the loss of parents and teachers and leaders. Discontinuated with respect to ancient, time-honored beliefs and traditions abounded.

New forms of disease, mainly tuberculosis and polio, took over where smallpox and influenza left off and, in the post-World War II era, a new agent of social and cultural disruption - the boarding school program - emerged.

In 1931 the Secretary of the Interior transferred responsibility for education of Alaska Natives from the Bureau of Education to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. When World War II came to Alaska in the early 1940's and Native and non-Native contact intensified throughout the territory, the BIA adopted a policy of assimilation. Instead of converting entire Native groups to Western culture, individual Natives would be conditioned for assimilation.

To facilitate this new policy,

the BIA in 1947 opened a high school for Natives (Mt. Edgecumbe) at the site of World War II Naval air station at Sitka. When MT. Edgecumbe became full and could not accommodate all the

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Natives that the BIA sought to immerse in Western education, Alaska Native students were shipped off to boarding schools operated by the BIA in other states. The bureau also operated an elementary school at Wrangell for children from communities with no school facility at all. Significantly, the philosophical emphasis of the BIA program changed from keeping Native children in their home communities to taking them out of their communities and encouraging them not to return.

From an economic perspective, the first six decades of this century - or, the period of global incorporation - set the pattern that still exist today: i.e. Alaska Natives, though integrating in varying degrees into Alaska's expanding mercantile and resource extraction economies, remained largely on the sidelines. During the early part of the twentieth century, exploita-

tion of Alaska's own resources kept pace as the United States industrialized. "Alaska Natives rarely reaped advantages from this development. Non-Natives entrepreneurs employed them when it

made economic sense and ignored them when it did not."

In the Aleutian Islands, the federal

government operated a lucrative fur seal industry. While Aleuts were employed in that industry, the role of the Aleuts has been characterized as one of "virtual involuntary servitude." And in Bristol Bay and Kodiak, where commercial fisheries were expanding year after year, most of the jobs in canneries and aboard forhire fishing vessels operated by the canneries, went to imported laborers. The following passage, which pertains specifically to the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta area

during this time period but which has a much wider descriptive application, is instructive: Although the Yukon-Kuskokwim region was integrated into the worldwide economy, albeit in a peripheral way, the Natives had less access to information, productive resources, and capital, and less control over local business than did their white counterparts.

At the same time, pressures on fish and wildlife resources - brought about by Alaska's escalating non-Native population and intensified commercial harvesting - comprised the ability of Natives to adequately meet their subsistence needs. Heightening political battles over resource rights and allocations compounded the growing problem. Subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering as traditionally practiced by Alaska Natives was the epitome of self-reliance. Yet, this one avenue still open to Natives to meet their own needs independent of outside interference or involvement was, itself, becoming narrower.