

Hopson became a recognized Eskimo leader

by Vern Metcalfe
for the Tundra Times

Eben Hopson created the North Slope Borough simply because he saw an opportunity to tax the oil industry, thereby gaining a fair share of the oil wealth being extracted from the North Slope — once known as the North of the Brooks Range.

As anyone who has flown over this most northern section of the United States can attest, it is a land of millions of small ponds, and — despite anything you may have read — is not necessarily "fragile" in nature.

Hopson was a member of a large family, the grandson of an English whaler who found himself landlocked with the rest of his crew in the Beaufort Sea and decided to stay on. Hopson described him to me as being "small in stature, but one tough guy" who late in life went back to England for a visit and didn't bother to return.

Hopson was to go on to be the recognized leader of those Eskimo people who reside along the Arctic Ocean, and also as the founder of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

It was my good fortune to be able to accompany him to Inuvik, Northwest Territories, to the planning meeting for the first conference which was held in Greenland the following year.

Also along was Willie Hensley of Kotzebue, a member of a newer generation of leaders, plus a number of staff people. In attendance were Canadian Eskimos, plus one "Professor of



Eskimology" at the Copenhagen University in Denmark. The latter was fluent in Danish, English and several dialects of his Native language.

During this three-day conclave, we also met with the Native Association, which had membership from Athabascans, as well as Eskimos. They were pursuing a land claims settlement and were interested in the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act legislation.

We also discovered that the Eskimo delegation was more than slightly suspicious of their Alaskan brethren. This came about when Hopson and Hensley read a draft of a constitution and by-laws for the ICC.

As one who had a parent raised in Canada, I was aware of the differences in our forms of government, and it finally dawned on me that the Cana-

dians had no idea of this entire business.

It wasn't until the past several years that Canada had a constitution, and thusly our friends had little idea of what this was all about. Once this was cleared up to the satisfaction of all concerned, the meeting was indeed productive.

Hopson told me that this was his greatest hope for his people, the coming together of the Inuit (simply, "the people") to pursue common causes such as life, liberty and the pursuit of justice. The first had been hard from the beginning; liberty was in the eyes of the beholder, not necessarily the Inuit; and justice was something that the non-Eskimo spoke about, but did not necessarily extend to the Inuit.

To say that the white man is viewed with suspicion by the Inuits is to

understate the case. Hopson's experience with not being accorded a secondary education is merely one isolated instance of the cruelty experienced by our generation.

I say "our" because Hopson and myself were of an age. Despite his eighth grade education, Hopson was acknowledged as one of the premier parliamentarians during his legislative career.

Evidence of this came about when a bill he opposed passed the Senate. That afternoon he attached an amendment to another bill that, the Senate discovered three days later, repealed the one passed earlier in the day.

He also was a workaholic, both at home and when in Juneau during his legislative days.

He had a modest home in Barrow and proudly showed how he had added on to it with his own carpentry and other building skills. The addition allowed for a sewing room for his wife, who made custom parkas for friends, as well as the marketplace. He also showed me the town one gorgeous day which caused his secretary to view me as a VIP.

She told me that, and I raised an eyebrow and asked why.

"Well, the Mayor just doesn't give tours to anyone, just important people," she said.

No better compliment was ever paid to me. And few greater success stories have found their way to the lore of Alaska than that of Eben Hopson.

I'm glad that I had the privilege of knowing him as he passed this way.