



The signing of the Anti-Discrimination Bill passed by the 1945 Territorial Legislature. (L- r ) Sen. O.D. Cochran, (D) Nome; Elizabeth Peratrovich (Klawock); Gov. Ernest Gruening; Rep. Anderson, (D) Nome; Sen. N.R. Walker, (D) Ketchikan and Roy Peratrovich ( Klawock.)

Elizabeth Peratrovich -

## *The courage to overcome*

Like a story from the sixties civil rights movements, the story of Alaska's civil rights movement is one of blatant racism, and ultimately, the courage to overcome.

Feb. 16 is Elizabeth Peratrovich Day in the state. Her contribution to the fight for equal rights was great. It was 48 years ago - - Feb. 8, 1945 when the Territorial Legislature passed landmark anti-discrimination legislation, in part because of the forceful comments of Peratrovich.

Peratrovich was Grand Camp President of the Alaska Native

Sisterhood. Her husband, Roy, was Grand President of the Alaska Native Brotherhood in 1945.

Both were fighting for passage of the anti-discrimination bill for good reasons:

\* At the time, most Juneau restaurants wouldn't serve Natives. Many businesses wouldn't cater to Native clientele. 'No Indians Allowed' signs were prevalent, including one in the window of the Selective Service office ( World War II - - - remember.)

*Continued on page 3*



● Continued from page 1

\* Natives paid a school tax, but Native children were not allowed to attend public schools.

\* Discrimination extended to housing, too. The Peratroviches, who moved to Juneau from Klawock in 1941, made arrangements to lease a home they liked. When the owners discovered they were Native, the lease was cancelled.

Though many, including then Gov. Ernest Gruening, fought against racism, anti-discrimination legislation was introduced and defeated in the 1943 Territorial Legislature.

Two years later it came up again and passed in the House but faced strong opposition in the Senate. A Juneau senator spoke against the equal rights bill during a floor debate.

'Far from being brought closer together, which will result from this bill, the races should be kept further apart,' he said. 'Who are these people barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?'

Then, as was the practice of the day, people in the gallery were asked if they had comments on the bill. Roy Peratrovich, at the request of a senator, already spoke in favor of the measure. Elizabeth Peratrovich then stepped to the podium.

'I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights,' she said.

Minutes later she was asked if she thought the bill would stop discrimination. 'Do your laws against larceny and even murder prevent those crimes? No law will eliminate crimes but at least you as legislators can assert to the world you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak your intent to help us overcome discrimination.'

The bill passed the Senate, 11-5 and was signed into law eight days later.

Today, the words of Elizabeth Peratrovich still have meaning. The era of institutionalized racism is over - - it's against the law to put 'No Indians Allowed' signs in windows, but that doesn't mean discrimination is a thing of the past. Today, it's just more subtle.

All of us must 'recognize the evil of the situation' and speak out against discrimination.

- - - Larry Persilly  
Juneau Empire



ELIZABETH PERATROVICH



(Tundra Times photo)

ROY PERATROVICH