

# Aleuts Win One

"There has been disturbing incidences that have happened on the Pribilofs. We feel that these should be cleared up so the Aleuts on those islands can enjoy the freedom and pursuit of happiness as laid down by the Constitution of the United States."

With this editorial comment in November of 1964, this newspaper began a nineteen-month series of news stories describing the astonishingly oppressive control exercised by the United States Government over the lives of Aleut people on St. George and St. Paul. The newspaper reported that Pribilovians were living in virtual servitude without self-government, that the Aleut residents could not own their own land and homes, that the Aleuts had been denied civil service retirement benefits accorded other federal employees and that persons were prohibited freedom of movement to the islands to visit and meet with Priblovians. A Pribilof Home Rule Bill, addressing these inequities, was signed into law late in 1966.

Quietly and persistently, the Priblovians continued to press a claim filed against the United States in 1951 for the failure of the Government to provide adequate goods and services in addition to fair compensation as promised when Congress made the Pribilofs a "special reservation" in 1870. Evidence was presented to the Indian Claims Commission that the Pribilof Aleuts were kept in a "condition of impoverished near-peonage" while millions were reaped from the seal monopolies held by the Government and its lease-holders.

This month, the Pribilof Aleuts won. The Indian Claims Commission, in a series of complex calculations, estimated that the Aleuts were denied \$11,239,604 in goods, services and compensation promised them and awarded damages in that amount.

The language of the opinion is significant. In part, it stated, "What the figures do not show, by themselves, is the sheer misery in which the Pribilof Aleuts lived. The record shows that compensation to the Aleuts was absolutely minimal and that the Aleuts suffered terribly 'because of lack of proper housing, fuel, food, clothing, water, and sanitation. The Government was obligated to provide for 'comfort,' but 'wretchedness' and anguish' are the words that more accurately describe the condition of the Pribilof Aleuts. The accompanying findings of fact, drawing upon reports of contemporary observers, recite many instances of hardship and suffering; this evidence alone mandates the conclusion that the United States did not do for plaintiffs what should have been done."

The claim, filed for goods and services and wages, did not seek compensation for greater losses and sufferings of the Pribilovians. In the words of the Commissioners, "No numbers have been put on the effects of the policy of educational deprivation apparently aimed at keeping the Aleuts from so much knowledge of the outside world as would excite their aspirations for a better lot. Damages were not sought for the consequences of malnourishment and disease which seemed for a time to have doomed the population to extinction. And no appropriate dollar figure is suggested or suggests itself to compensate for this history of subjugation and exploitation."

We asked Patrick Pletnikoff, executive director of the Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Association, who was most responsible for this effort. He replied, "Iliodior Merculiof, for his wisdom and his integrity, and for his belief that his people were not served right, and for his courage to stand up to his Government under very difficult conditions."

Our congratulations to Iliodor and the Pribilof Aleuts for the courage and persistence applied toward righting one wrong among many sad chapters in the history of the Aleut people. It is a fine example for the rest of us in our extended family of 70,000 people.