

'I may not agree with what you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it'—VOLTAIRE

15th anniversary for ANCSA

A day of great significance passed quietly recently. That day was December 18th, the 15th anniversary of the signing into law of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Much has happened in the last 15 years to show just how imperfect the settlement act was and is. It is important, however, for all of us to keep in mind that no matter what ANCSA's imperfections are, it was a vital and an important step in protecting Native ownership of a small portion of the lands Natives traditionally used and occupied.

It is certainly easy to criticize ANCSA for the problems it has caused. Many people are seriously questioning various aspects of the act, and with the benefit of hindsight they are finding ways it could be improved.

At the same time, we believe it is more important to look at the 1971 act as a starting point on which Alaska Natives have continued to protect and maintain inherent rights to own and manage Native lands.

We should keep in mind the fact that Congress constitutionally retains the right to dispose of Native lands and Native land rights. And if the 1971 act had not passed Congress there might be little — if anything — left for Natives to attempt to protect.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that the corporate structure set up in ANCSA is not appropriate for everyone. Alaska Natives need flexibility to determine the ownership patterns which fit each group best. This is particularly so at the village level.

Therefore, we believe it is important that as we begin the 16th year of ANCSA the Native community must come together to resolve these issues and others that have become part of the "1991" package of amendments to the settlement act.

A great deal of hard work went into achieving the settlement in 1971 and to making a number of changes in its 15-year history. Additional diligence and hard work will be needed by the Native community if all Alaska Natives are to protect the settlement achieved in 1971.

We'd like to recall the dream of *Tundra Times* founder Howard Rock, who always believed Alaska Natives must be united.

Howard never swerved from that dream, and everything he did was an effort to focus on the goals and aspirations of Alaska Natives.

The new year is an important time to think about how to keep that dream alive. Achieving improvements to the settlement act won't be easy. The difficulties encountered in Congress in 1986 must serve as a warning that success is possible, but that it will come only through a united effort.