

# Victor Fischer Pens Book About Constitutional Convention

FAIRBANKS — The drafting of a state constitution was one of the last essential acts in the long campaign for statehood, and 55 Alaskans labored diligently during the winter of 1955-56 to produce such a document.

They convened on the University of Alaska's Fairbanks campus on Nov. 8, 1955 and completed their work 75 days later, as they were required to do by the legislative act authorizing the convention. The Territorial Legislature had appropriated \$300,000 to underwrite it.

The constitution to which the delegates affixed their names on Feb. 5, 1956 was subsequently hailed as one of the nation's finest, and, in fact, there have been few substantive amendments to it over the years since Alaska became a state.

Now the story of the convention has been told for the first time in a new book written by one of the delegates to it, Victor Fischer, presently the director of the University of Alaska's Institute of Social,

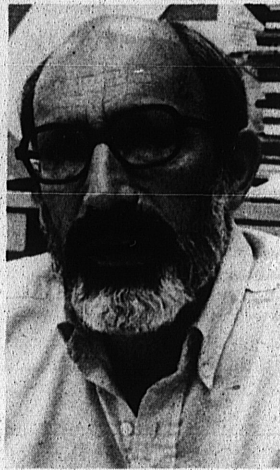
Economic and Government Research at Fairbanks.

The University of Alaska Press is publisher of the book, titled "Alaska's Constitutional Convention." The National Municipal League sponsored the book as one of its State Constitutional Convention Studies. Financial support was provided by the Carnegie Corporation.

At the time he was elected a delegate to the convention, Fischer was planning director for the City of Anchorage and vice president of Operation Statehood, a citizens group organized to help press the fight for statehood.

It was Fischer who proposed that the Alaskan voting age be lowered from 21 to 18. The convention after sharp debate finally compromised on 19, which at that time was widely looked upon as a progressive act. The Alaska Constitution has since been amended to make 18 the legal voting age.

John E. Bebout of the National



VICTOR FISCHER

Municipal League, a consultant to the convention, is quoted in the book's foreword:

"The constitution was literally written by the delegates in convention assembled. It was more truly a 'do-it-yourself'

convention on the part of the delegates than any other in modern times — certainly in this century.

"It is hard to convince audiences in the lower 48 that this is so — they simply don't understand the very high level of sophistication, intellectual competence, philosophic breadth, and practical experience represented by the 55 delegates, and they can hardly imagine how hard and single-mindedly . . . Alaskans worked at the job."

Fischer's comprehensive book is the basic reference on the convention. The first part of the book describes the evolution of the statehood movement, the actions taken by the Territorial Legislature to prepare for the convention, organization and administration of the convention, and the process of constitution writing.

The second part deals with the key issues of the convention and the third the convention's end and aftermath, including the ratification campaign (Alaskans

approved the constitution by a better than two-to-one margin), effect of the constitution on the statehood campaign, and finally Fischer's conclusions and reflections on the convention.

"While the exact influence of the constitution upon congressional approval of statehood . . . cannot really be assessed," he says, "its writings, ratification, and related activities clearly had the desired effect of attracting national attention to the statehood cause."

"Once the constitution itself was available for review, praise came from many directions, all of it duly reported in the Alaska press and fed directly to the U.S. Congress and the nation's media as one more strong argument for statehood."

Statehood was assured on June 30, 1958 when the U.S. Senate approved a House-passed statehood measure. President Eisenhower the following Jan. 3 issued the proclamation formally admitting Alaska to the Union and activating its constitution.

"Looking back from almost two decades, we can now judge the 1955-56 convention to have been a success, both by helping to achieve statehood and by providing Alaska with a workable constitution," writes Fischer.

"Since becoming effective with statehood in 1959, the constitution has served Alaska well — so well that the state legislature has found it necessary to initiate only a few minor amendments, none of which affect the basic principles of the structure of government spelled out in the charter."

Among factors contributing to the success of the convention, he writes, was the "idealism inherent in the statehood movement" which served to "greatly inspire the convention delegates and the people of Alaska."

It is questionable, he says, "whether such a perfect base for constitutional writing as existed in Alaska (then) can occur again."

"Another aspect of the Alaska convention that contributed to its success — one that cannot be replicated in any constitutional revision program — was the fact that it took place before statehood was achieved. As a result, it proceeded outside the realms of conventional political pressures and realities."

Many of the convention delegates took on responsible roles in the new state. Convention president William A. Egan became the state's first governor and vice president Ralph J. Rivers the state's first congressman.

Included in the appendices of Fischer's book are the constitution, the convention enabling act passed by the legislature, rules of the convention, committee membership, and brief biographies of the delegates and consultants.

The book will shortly be available at bookstores and through the Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, at \$4 a copy in paperback, \$7.50 in hard cover.

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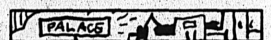
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