

# Tundra Times



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Howard Rock Editor and Publisher  
October, 1962 to April, 1976

## Guest editorial

by Janie Leask

Alaska Federation of Natives president

Last week, our family joined thousands of other Alaskans to celebrate Thanksgiving. At first blush, it may seem ironic that Alaska Natives celebrate the survival of the pilgrims who would nearly devastate our cultures later.

One of the things Alaska Natives have to be thankful for is the celebration this month of the 75th anniversary of the Alaska Native Brotherhood. Since their founding in 1912, the ANB has helped bring about great progress in every area of Alaska Native lives.

When the Alaska Native Brotherhood was formed, Alaska Natives were not recognized as U.S. citizens. Tribal lands we had inhabited since time immemorial were not protected. We did not have the right to vote, and there were no formal opportunities for education. Public institutions were racially segregated.

ANB fought for U.S. citizenship and the right to vote, which Alaska Natives received in 1924 with the passage of the Citizenship Act.

Later, ANB was the first Native group to fight for a settlement of aboriginal land claims. The Tlingit and Haida lawsuit provided valuable lessons to the Alaska Federation of Natives in our successful attempt to secure passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

Another area where ANB has been very active is in fighting discrimination. ANB was instrumental in the passage of the Anti-Discrimination Bill in 1945 by the Alaska territorial legislature that made discrimination based on race illegal. The same bill had failed after a tie-vote in 1943.

Testifying before the territorial legislature on the bill was ANB Grand President Roy Peratrovich and his wife, Elizabeth, grand president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood.

During the hearings, Elizabeth was asked if the law would eliminate discrimination. Her response was "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 that you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak your intent to help us overcome discriminations."

It has been 32 years now since the bill was passed and just as Elizabeth predicted, discrimination based on race has not been totally eliminated.

However, passage of the bill was a major victory for Alaska Natives and other minorities. Following its passage, the signs that said "No Dogs or Indians allowed" on the front windows of local establishments were dispensed. Schools and other public establishments were eventually desegregated.

Today, our children can hardly imagine the society in which these things occurred. For this, we can be thankful. This reflects true progress.

Yet, even as our children take the benefits of these victories that ANB helped to achieve for granted, we must keep our vigil to ensure that will not occur again.